

multi-nationals. There is huge difficulty in finding work placements in rural areas, for those without 'connections' and there are costs involved in travelling to work placement, the adjustments needed for students with SEND. All this threatens the ability of students to choose the course they are interested in or passionate about.

If the Government wants our post-16 qualifications to be truly 'gold standard' for all young people then I don't think they can just look at one area of qualifications. You can't reform vocational qualifications and leave A-levels alone, especially if it's just because you don't understand them, Gavin.

How can the NEU respond? Well, I think we have also got to stop the 'othering' of those students who take, and the members who teach, vocational / technical or general applied qualifications. I'd like to see our press releases around results day reflect that actually the majority of post-16 students study a mixed economy of A-levels plus a BTEC or general applied qualification.

We also need to be much more vocal in calling out the Government on how it reports on the successes of the T-level project. Where has the money gone? How many colleges are actually delivering them? What are the results? How many couldn't be completed because of the work placement requirement? How is recruitment of students onto them for this September?

**4. What are your thoughts on the relationship between the academic and the vocational in the current post-16 system, and how if at all do you think this relationship should be reformed in future?**

**Gawain Little**

I believe we need a complete review of 14-19 education led by the profession itself. I think we need to move beyond the 'academic/vocational' divide and genuinely offer equal status and the ability for students to pick from across a spectrum of courses including academic and vocational elements. This needs to be part of a National Education Service which provides education to all from cradle to grave. As a union, we need a long-term strategy to fight for this alternative vision of education.

**Martin Powell-Davies**

Historically, our education system has always been marred by a class divide between academic and vocational education. In contrast, the aim of trade unionists and socialists, like myself, has always been to counter that separation and, instead, to build a curriculum that helps to educate 'fully developed human beings'.

As DGS, I would therefore fully support campaigns to enact NEU policy of 'a reformed, unified, properly-funded system of 14-19 curriculum and qualifications which [would] help bring an end to the notion that academic and technical learning pathways at 16 are an "either/or" option'. We need a teacher-led review of the whole examination system which includes recommendations that encourage all young people to be taught both more traditionally 'academic' and 'vocational' topics, rather than dividing students into separate pathways. Of course, given the present role of the examination system in grading and sifting young people for university admissions and routes into employment, for successful implementation such a change also requires working to overcome the huge income inequality between different types of work - and for those not in permanent employment at all - within our society as a whole and for a society that values education in its own right.

**Niamh Sweeney**

Continuing from above [ie her answer to question 3. Ed.] - there is lots NEU members, particularly our leadership members, can do to break down the barriers between academic and vocational qualifications. I worked at a school once that wouldn't allow students with predicted high grades in their GCSEs study a BTEC Level 2 as part of their programme of study. They were considered 'too good' for it, or it not good enough for them. Vocational and applied qualifications are often considered 'easy' and that simply isn't true. A whole load of 'lockdown' haircuts prove just how difficult Level 1 or 2 hairdressing is and how much we should value those who complete the qualifications to distinction level.

We currently have an 'academic' education system policed by exams. We are in the top three in the world for rote learning. Students come to me at post-16 and they are exhausted, have lost the love for learning and often don't have the independent learning and studying skills we expect them to have. Vocational / technical and general applied qualifications, like the ones I teach in Criminology and Health and Social Care not only spark their interest and provide excellent stepping stones into the world of work or higher education, but they also develop critical thinking and problem solving skills, they tackle complex subject matter that help our young people become the active, global citizens we need them to be.



*On pages 9-13 we print article versions of the introductory talks given by Nina Doran and Matt O'Leary at the PSE zoom session titled 'Lesson observation: top-down or democratic control?' that we held in May 2021.*

# Management fixation with observations

**Nina Doran**

'It is always from the depths of its impotence that each power centre draws its power, hence their extreme maliciousness, and vanity.'

Gilles Deleuze

One of the biggest impacts on teachers has been the increased performance management in the sector. As a teacher educator and UCU rep, the management focus has been dominated by a logic that respects a high level of performance-managed observations of teaching and learning \* (OTL). Yet, the most effective education systems in the world do not entertain such logic.

It has always baffled me that the senior leader preference resides with current observation regimes to measure teacher effectiveness with a simplistic grade or number. Likewise, the pressure of no-notice observations, the random pop-in or walk-by observations, sometimes as many as six a year, that take no account of context, have certainly given UCU a lot of work to do to resist.

You will probably appreciate that teacher educators in teacher education departments conduct observations that are based on the development of teachers, in a collaborative and collegial way, and are linked to professional development and research. Unfortunately, outside of teacher education the rhetoric has been to develop but the practice has been to manage.

One of the main stumbling blocks for consultation centres on the reductive nature of OTL; the overall competence of a teacher is reduced to the grade or judgement given in a single observation. The consequences have been to diminish the role of reflection and creativity. In many instances it has also undermined collegiality and trust. Kim Mather

and Roger Seifert (2014) argue that control has shifted from the front-line professionals to the senior management teams. So it is no surprise that during this time discussion and debate has been volatile.

A brutal consequence of the current use of graded OTL is to crudely divide teachers into two classes - as effective or ineffective. The ineffective group are then punished whereby college policies link observations to the disciplinary or capability procedures. In some cases, teachers have been dismissed by their employer or have resigned from the profession. UCU have shown how the fear of OTLs can impact severely on esteem, health and wellbeing in an already heavily workload-burdened sector. Clearly, the issue of OTL is an emotive one that causes a whole range of disputes on its aims and consequences. There are many cases where teachers have taken their discontent to industrial action and the boycotting of lesson observations, as they increasingly experience these policies as punitive.

For a moment, however, let's consider that the performance management observations did have some merit; they would certainly need to appreciate that teaching has a complexity and variety to it that is hard to pin down to one set of assessment criteria. The complexity of teaching in FE offers a diversity that is unmatched in other sectors. So if it is to be a useful yardstick for measurement then its design would need to take into account the various contexts (Morrison, 2015). Unfortunately, in many cases it seems that senior managers prefer quantitative numbers to qualitative feedback.

One can see the advantage of data evidence within the broader policy context of yoyo change and policy volatility (Policy Consortium, 2018). Yet the academic research is clear; there are methodological weaknesses in observing teaching

as a tool to improve practice when it is done to teachers rather than with teachers. What is the answer then? Well, UCU argue that OTL must necessitate a process that is collaborative and focused, if observations are to deliver any substantial improvements in practice.

Certain forms of knowledge seem to have become more valuable than others; the discourse of measurability has dominated literature on developing teaching standards in favour of the data, grading and targets. The complexity of a teaching and learning process has been reduced to the presentation of performance data!

Let's take a side look at Ofsted - their focus has been on measurement at the expense of what is important to students and teachers. However, Ofsted have changed their view on graded observations and dropped the grading in favour of a narrative. Despite this reversal of fortune, most colleges remained fixated on grading, whilst senior college figures continue to shrewdly suggest that large colleges have been helped by the grading in order for them to understand their overall quality of teaching. Unfortunately, what remains constant is that Ofsted inspection grades can have a huge effect on a college's status. The consequence of this is that managers keep their focus on observing teaching and learning, despite the methodology being unsound. What would it take to reverse this style of teacher assessment? Matt O'Leary (2014) proposes peer collaboration and peer dialogue to develop our practice and to strengthen observation as a tool for reflection - it is this control of our work and space that needs taking back. It's here that we need to find ways of arming activists to develop the arguments for change.

The battleground of opinion continues over what are essentially issues of power and trust. The heart of the conflict seems to be between agency of teachers and the structure or processes in the workplace, or, to take Foucault's words, between power and control. Researchers insist that OTLs are completely pointless exercises and UCU (2015) argue they are unfit for purpose. It seems that government departments and funding agencies make decisions without properly understanding the impact. 'We should be offering them the best possible training, supporting them in any way we can and systematically removing any burdens which stand in the way of their success' (Allen, 2018). For the sector to thrive there should be no greater priority than retaining and developing great teachers. Current management observations, however, do very little to realise this goal.

There was a brief episode in our careers where New Labour attempted to increase the professional status of the sector, but it was a brief rhetorical ruse

to get teachers to collaborate willingly in their exploitation. The attempts to dismantle professional autonomy during the regime of observations certainly sides with that view. Similarly, Clow (2001) emphasises the intensification in FE where work privileges of an educated workforce are eroded may be instrumental not accidental. The question is whether our professional autonomy is one of those privileges being affected as the pursuit of teacher observation assessment advances.

Many would probably agree that being professional about your work means to be deeply caring about it. With this notion one would expect there to be deeper respect for those that conduct their work in a professional way - yet the effect of observation policy has been to erode that very professionalism. Clow (2001) argues that possibly the caring or emotional labour we associate with a profession has not been matched by a spread of professional rights and support. To Craig (2006) it is 'dumbed down' professionalism. The expectations have remained the same but without the support and resources to maintain the high standards of professionalism we would advocate.

As trade unionists and educators, we cannot look at teaching without looking at the purpose of education. At the turn of the last century, the philosopher Bertrand Russell looked to education to pursue democratic aims; in a democracy all questions are open for discussion and all opinions are open to some doubt, to such an extent that teaching the 'open mind' is powerful against bigotry. What matters is not what opinions are held but how they are held; hence not dogmatically but tentatively, and with a clear understanding that new information may come along that may lead us to change our views. The impossibility, therefore, of making a final judgement on the performance of the teacher from a 40 minute OTL goes to highlight the profound misunderstanding of the purpose of teaching.

I think it is worth remembering here that the role of education is to question certainty where evidence is weak; opinions and/or judgements that have come about from current OTLs, which may have uncertainty of evidence, may be served well by the principles outlined by Russell. Activists and teachers need to keep questioning judgements and resist the dogmatism of certainty where the evidence is weak. Similarly, for Dewey the teachers should always be seen as learners. The risks of not doing so could lead to more of the normalisation and reductionism already warned about earlier in this article.

When aspects of professionalism are weakened, as has happened in FE, it is of little surprise that teachers express anxiety and

frustration due to what they see as unsound and unfounded management processes. Interestingly, as the pressure builds to improve standards of teaching and learning and student outcomes, OTLs are not having the impact expected of them. Yet performance management observations remain the focus of many sector leaders. If they are so convinced they are a good idea, should we teachers design a framework that includes observations of those same sector leaders?

\*Observations of teaching and learning are graded observations where lessons are assessed and given a pass/fail result; or graded in terms of a number, letter or against Ofsted's own grades - 'outstanding', 'good', 'requires improvement', 'inadequate'. They can also be judged as effective/ineffective or similar terms.

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## Where we stand:

***Post-16 Educator seeks to defend and extend good practice in post compulsory education and training. Good practice includes teachers working with students to increase their power to look critically at the world around them and act effectively within it. This entails challenging racism, sexism, heterosexism, inequality based on disability and other discriminatory beliefs and practices.***

***For the mass of people, access to valid post compulsory education and training is more necessary now than ever. It should be theirs by right! All provision should be organised and taught by staff who are trained for and committed to it. Publicly funded provision of valid post compulsory education and training for all who require it should be a fundamental demand of the trade union movement.***

***Post-16 Educator seeks to persuade the labour movement as a whole of the importance of this demand. In mobilising to do so it bases itself first and foremost upon practitioners - those who are in direct, daily contact with students. It seeks the support of every practitioner, in any area of post-16 education and training, and in particular that of women, of part timers and of people outside London and the Southeast.***

***Post-16 Educator works to organise readers/contributors into a national network that is democratic, that is politically and financially independent of all other organisations, that develops their practice and their thinking, and that equips them to take action over issues rather than always having to react to changes imposed from above.***