

Teaching in the time of Covid

Kerry Scattergood talks to Rob Peutrell about the collective writing project ‘Working and Living in FE during the COVID-19 Pandemic’ (1) and what we might learn from the FE lockdown. The interview was conducted in early September 2021.

Rob: Talk a bit about the project. What prompted it?

Kerry: It came out of an #FEResearchMeet (2) that, due to Covid, we ran online. We wanted to encourage FE practitioners to write about their experience of lockdown to demonstrate research, but also for reflection.

For me, #FEResearchMeets are about challenging that impostor syndrome in FE - so much research is done on FE from HE - so the project was very much about empowering FE voices to tell their experience of the first Covid lockdown. It would be interesting to repeat it for the second lockdown; my experience was very different. First time, it was do what you can. My role was very pastoral - I was working with a woman stuck at home in a tower block with an autistic child and no outdoor space. Just sitting and listening and being with her. The second lockdown felt like business-as-usual.

We were conscious that some contributors had written a lot previously; some had never written anything. So people had the opportunity of peer support - to write in pairs or even threes. They could write together or write something and share and improve it. It was democratic and like an #FEResearchMeet, where everyone's welcome, about community and confidence. We framed the writing around four questions to give it structure. Some people addressed the questions, others didn't. The editorial team just did some minor editing to ensure everything was readable.

Rob: What are the main themes in the collection?

Kerry: Some are very obvious - the ‘new normal’, and the last theme: ‘final thoughts on a kinder more trusting sector’. Some themes were well-known: workload, home-life balance, trust, professional learning, how we use technology in education. Covid heightened these issues, didn't it? But for me the

messages about students are really important. Teachers' voices are important but we've got to remember the reason we're here and not lose sight of students. There's a collective: ourselves and our students. I loved the HE strikes when students were saying: ‘you treat our lecturers like this and you're taking away our learning’. That collective view of teaching and learning is a beautiful thing, which neo-liberal education doesn't reflect. It treats students as consumers, who should be outraged when their teachers strike rather than saying: ‘we're with you’.

Rob: PSE has long argued that ordinary teachers need time and space to talk and write about education as they experience it. Could you talk more about this aspect?

Kerry: I love the word ‘ordinary’ because there's nothing ordinary about FE! We're all so different. Apart from the power and agency it gives, one thing that's important about our publication is that it's so context rich. It's empowering to reflect on the different contexts in the sector. For example, the HE-in-FE experience is so different from university HE. Many who teach HE at my college also teach FE; the boundary is blurred.

I don't think we have the space to talk or write enough about our practice or education as we experience it. We might talk about technology and what to do with it, or assessment and how to go about it in professional development events but not about what we're actually doing in actual classrooms or reflecting on our practice.

But having a space to talk and write and reflect on your practice is about being heard, and is the most important thing for me. Whether that's sharing *your* story and how empowering that is. Or whether that's, say, in my classroom in a women's centre with survivors of sexual or domestic violence who have been objectified and don't matter and are the voices furthest from our education system; to be with people and hear them is so empowering and

confidence building and frankly - I'm going to get a bit over the top and say transformative and life-changing. I think if someone listens to you - whether they give advice or better just listen - and you work things out for yourself, the control and agency, the confidence and self-belief that *'I can do this'* and *'I can do it better next time'* is a fantastic, empowering experience. I don't think any education does that enough but certainly not FE.

Rob: There is a tension between the stories, listening, dialogue, transformation you're describing and the systems we work in. Arguably, FE is less about transforming people's life situations than preparing them for often low-paid, precarious jobs.

Kerry: Yes, good workers not critical thinkers! Let's keep people poor and not give people control over their own lives because they might notice! A good example in an ESOL and literacy context is learners bring forms in and say *'help me with this'* and you can decide: do it for them or give them the skills, confidence, self-belief, language to do it for themselves. It isn't about transforming people's lives by doing things for them but I always say transformative for people rather than transforming - i.e. something we're doing for them.

Rob: The project talks about the hope of not going back to 'business as usual' and for a different kind of post-pandemic FE. What might that look like?

Kerry: A key theme for me was that our relationships made possible what was possible during the lockdown, whether it was an online conference, the writing project we did remotely, or students and virtual classrooms. I don't think the students would have been successful if we hadn't built on those existing relationships. It's easy with 'business-as-usual' to forget how important collective, social relationships are. They may want to call a college a business, but we need to recognise that our business is social and involves humanbeings. But the other thing is that workloads haven't changed, have they? I remember feeling cross at one point that everyone on Twitter seemed almost idyllic that we were going to live better lives after Covid. Some of my learners really struggled with the lockdown. There's a place of privilege when I'm sat in my nice, warm front-room teaching online when I've got one student stuck in India who can't get back to the UK and who's accessing the class remotely using all their data, or someone locked down in a tower block with a child next to her they're trying to home school saying: *'sorry, Kerry, I've got*

to go and help her, she's struggling, I'll be back in a minute'.

Much also comes back to time and how we use that time. If we're straight back into a timetable, we're straight back busy, and we've still got the workload issues.

Rob: There is a powerful thread running through the collection around collectivity - mutual care, sharing ideas and know-how, helping resilience - and teachers' capacity to control their own professional learning. How do we connect these themes with issues of workplace organising and collective workplace power?

Kerry: We can show that it's possible to do things ourselves grassroots. But one problem is that people get involved in projects like this because they happen to see a thread on Twitter. What about those who don't know that these conversations are happening and are struggling in toxic colleges?

I'm conscious that people were excluded from our project because they wouldn't know that things like the *#FEResearchMeet* exists. Yet their voices are equally valid. A colleague who did contribute said to her team *'we've done this, why don't you write your stories?'* One of them emailed me her story. She didn't care that it was too late for the collection, it was the opportunity to reflect on her experience and what was meaningful to her that she didn't normally have time for. She told me that it was the most useful CPD she'd had all year. There's power in that.

As union reps, we too often come out to fight fires and solve problems. That's not enough. Workplaces with good unions are happier, sick rates are lower, CPD is better. We need to join the dots: relationships, solidarity, our practice, our pedagogy, our values.

I'm a learning rep. That should be a hugely important role in a branch. It's about your own voice and practice, and about teacher agency - me knowing what's good for me. Why isn't that a bigger union issue?

1. ***Working and Living in FE during the COVID-19 Pandemic: 27 FE Practitioners' Voices*** (2021). Edited by Jim Crawley, Jo Fletcher-Saxon, David Powell and Kerry Scattergood. Available online: <https://www.researchcollegiegroupp.co.uk/uploads/sites/6/2021/07/Working-and-living-in-FE-during-the-COVID-19-pandemic-FINAL-07-21-V2.pdf>

2. To find out more about the *#FEResearchMeet* see: <https://www.feresearchmeet.org/>