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# Further Education: skills sector or people's sector?

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Is Further Education (FE) a 'skills sector', developing human capital and driven by employer needs, or a 'social justice' sector developing citizens and driven by social needs?

## Living and learning in dreadful times

We are living in a time of planetary and systemic crisis characterised by environmental, social, economic and political breakdown at many levels. Our system has shown itself to be incapable of advancing social justice or even providing equitably for basic human needs. We find ourselves in an unsustainable system which generates, reproduces and amplifies inequality and injustice and is doing immeasurable damage to human and other life on our planet. It is hardly surprising if this contributes to a sense of despair, powerlessness and alienation. Everything we do in response should be judged on the scales of hope, justice, people-power and solidarity.

Education under capitalism promotes competition, acquisitiveness, accumulation, extraction and exploitation of every kind. Learning is increasingly viewed as a way of enhancing labour-power or 'human capital' rather than promoting human joy or flourishing. Our system encourages the labelling, sorting and segregating of learners, providers and programmes and designing of different tracks based on assumptions about people's capacities, educability and market value. Any socially just educational programme would reject all such hierarchies and address people as equals, starting from where they are.

Our current economic and social relations are shaped by capitalism and every aspect of our lives is infused with individualist market values. It can seem almost impossible to imagine any alternative to the hierarchy of knowledge and the definitions of values, subjects and achievement which characterise education under capitalism

Surviving our dreadful times will require us to understand and interpret our world as well as to act.

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Crisis should cause us to redefine what knowledge and skills we value. We need to analyse and understand the causes and consequences of our current condition, and to develop the skills and tools to change it. This means integrating knowledge with skills and theory with practice. A social justice curriculum would look very different to what is currently on offer. It would put values, care and solidarity at its heart, it would teach about risk, complexity and uncertainty and nurture our capacity for solidarity and collective action.

### How we think and talk about colleges

In my work I need to describe what colleges do and this often feels like an act of resistance against invisibility and ignorance because our sector is systematically under-represented and misunderstood in the national debates about education.

Like many others who have worked in Further Education, I 'discovered' the sector rather than setting out in it. I trained as secondary teacher, and while we got some time in primary classrooms, we were not offered college placements. It was possible to get quite a long way into a teaching career without any understanding or experience of the majority sector for the publicly-funded education of 16-18 year olds.

For many, 'college' suggests technical and vocational training for non-graduate, working-class jobs, possibly together with adult 'night school'. These are both positives to be celebrated but they offer only a partial picture of our work. The problem is that inaccurate assumptions and the categories based on them can be used to justify and reinforce selective and segregative practices and classist and racist prejudices.

### Narrative of FE

The dominant neoliberal narrative for colleges is that of a 'skill sector' serving the needs of capital. This started with incorporation in the 1990s which set colleges in competition with each other for students and income. It has ushered in a widespread acceptance of a Human Capital narrative which encourages us to see education as an investment in ourselves as labour market resources competing with each other. More recently, we have the notion of 'High Value Courses', a way of ranking educational qualifications based on the alleged lifetime earning potential of the students who acquire them.

There are alternative narratives, including colleges as producers of social value, civic purpose or human capabilities. A social justice narrative for

colleges would be one of personal and social transformation based on equality and democracy and developing collective criticality, agency and power.

### Ideology

Questions of value and purpose are ideological and one way to describe them is in terms of the three ideological positions set out by Dave Hill in his 2021 *Forum* article ('Comprehensive Education', *Forum* 63:1). The first is committed to capitalist reproduction, the second to a mitigated or 'progressive' capitalism and the third implies systemic rupture and radical transformation. Hill characterises them as: 'education to conform, education to reform or education to transform'.

In neoliberal capitalist ideology, value and relations are defined by capital in market terms and knowledge and skills are commodified, exchanged and traded. Knowledge, skill, value, learning and locations in the form of courses, provider types, qualifications and grades are all categorised in terms of their market value where the key questions are 'what is it worth?'

Human activity is narrowly categorised and separated into different spheres: politics, production, consumption, leisure and community. People are seen as more or less 'deserving', using measures and hierarchies of merit, and access to education and social mobility takes place within existing structures of inequality rather than challenging them. Essentialist assumptions and labels like high or low 'ability', high or low 'aspirations' and 'academic' or 'non-academic' study are treated as givens and not challenged or questioned.

**A progressive-neoliberal ideology** adopts some of the language of egalitarianism whilst continuing to reproduce inequalities, for example by emphasising recognition at the expense of representation and redistribution. This can include advocating for an idealised 'education for its own sake' of 'pure' knowledge untainted by utilitarianism, and individualist notions of self-discovery, 'fulfilling your potential' or 'becoming your best self' through education.

This approach recognises structural inequalities, but the commitment to 'equality of opportunity' and 'social mobility' emphasises individualism at the expense of solidarity. There is no cohesive critique of the system's fundamental values or structures and the grading, labelling and sorting of learners. There may be some commitment to mitigating some of the greatest inequalities and injustices, but this aims to make capitalism operate 'more fairly' while preserving fundamental social inequalities.

**A social justice ideology** is committed to fuller equality and open to the possibility of a new social order based on different values and relations. Equality, democracy and solidarity are taken beyond narrow liberal constraints to develop a collective capacity for transformation.

This deeper, fuller commitment to social equality and democracy values socially useful knowledge and capacities, collective intelligence and socialised knowledge as well as joy and the free development of all. It requires us to think analytically, systemically and dialectically and to value social utility and the development of 'really useful' knowledge and skills for empowerment, emancipation and liberation. As bell hooks says about learning and talking together in *Teaching Critical Thinking*, 'we break with the notion that our experience of gaining knowledge is private, individualistic and competitive'.

### A dialectical approach

Taking a dialectical approach means looking at the whole in relation to its parts, processes and relations, its history, development and internal tensions. In thinking about the work of colleges, we need to critically re-examine concepts which seem to be opposed, such as knowledge and skill, 'academic' and 'technical/vocational' or instrumentalism and learning 'for its own sake'.

This dialectical approach to education draws on a rich tradition and can help us decide how to act based on a rigorous analysis of power and ideology, the study of past and current resistance and an understanding of internal contradictions and how they drive change.

### Severances and reductions, connections and emergences

In *Revolutionary Social Transformation* Paula Allman reminds us that educational relations are knowledge relations. Knowledge is often treated as something separate from humans, to be accumulated as a commodity and then delivered to others. In other words, we relate to knowledge as something to possess, rather than something to produce and use together. This is possible because we have severed the act of acquiring knowledge from the act of producing it.

Capitalism encourages us to see our social, cultural, educational, economic and political activity as separate, emphasising individual agency and obscuring connections and systemic forces and making it harder for us to make sense of our

experience or build social value.

Capitalism tends to naturalise classism, racism, imperialism, inequality, exploitation and accumulation, to individualise resistance and to marginalise collective desire, joy, social purpose and non-commercial definitions of usefulness and human flourishing. It creates dualisms and prefers severance and reduction to connection and emergence.

This can be seen in the division of labour into 'academic' and 'non-academic', separating the study of the world from our experience and commitment to it. It is also evident in the labelling, grading, sorting and segregating of students, education providers, courses and qualifications to divide and rule and obscure the reality of unfulfilled opportunity.

### Imaginations of FE: towards a synthesis

Should we be aiming for a skills sector or a people's sector? The answer surely lies in a synthesis, but on our terms rather than those of capital. Colleges can be places of knowledge production and social change as well as knowledge transfer and social reproduction. This means reconnecting skill and knowledge, academic and vocational purpose, community and economy. It also means replacing a market of competing providers with a democratic and egalitarian national education system founded on a broader conception of social purpose and utility. Perhaps we need to rediscover and redefine the idea of the 'polytechnical' college which combines general and technical education, theoretical and practical study for all.

We need to exercise our radical imagination and engage in what Ruth Levitas in *Utopia as Method* calls 'the education of our desires . . . to open the way to aspiration, to teach desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way'.

This is undoubtedly a utopian project in the sense of utopia as a process not a destination. We cannot wait for others to do any of this for us, instead we need to incorporate our collective vision into our daily practice in the most critical, rigorous and joyful way possible.

