

# ‘I can see the broken eggs, but where’s the omelette?’

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Coffield, F., Costa, C., Muller, W., Webber, J., *Beyond Bulimic Learning: Improving teaching in further education*, London: IOE Press, 2014

Further education is a mess. So what? So thousands of FE teachers refuse to accept the barrage of reactionary approaches to teaching and learning forced on colleges by the coalition government and the inspectorate? Surely even reluctant managements have to go with the flow? How else can a college survive? So how can progressive teachers maintain their stance in isolation and faced with apparently universal official hostility?

It can be easy to get depressed about the state of further education. As a retired FE worker I sometimes do. And then I think how much worse it must be for those still employed. And then . . . Then I snap out of gloom or nostalgia for the good old days when an encounter with colleagues still in institutions, working in a sector organisation or researching FE restores my optimism.

The other antidote to depression is to read something written by a colleague with understanding about students, their teachers and the beating heart of further education. Frank Coffield is just such a colleague and his latest book, *Beyond Bulimic Learning*, is a welcome restorative. The book is sub-titled *Improving teaching in further education* and provides an excellent practical and political guide to doing so, as well as offering a devastating critique of the politics which have produced a mess of broken eggs rather than any nourishing omelette.

His central contention is that ‘students are bingeing on large amounts of information and then, in government induced bouts of vomiting otherwise known as national tests, they spew it all out’. But this within a context in which, for example, the Chief Inspector can boast that ‘If anyone says to you that staff morale is at an all-time low, you know you are doing something right’.

And of course Wilshaw’s political masters are meanwhile active on their over-arching project: education is just one of the ‘services being dismantled by a coalition government that has no democratic mandate for such fundamental reform’.

Faced with an onslaught that is ‘destructive, extreme or deliberately confrontational’, educators can and do adapt, pick, choose or combine one or more from Coffield’s list of six identified strategies. They can comply (and seethe internally) and retreat to teaching methods which challenge neither them nor their students – and certainly won’t frighten the inspectors. Here is where Coffield’s wonderful bulimia metaphor makes sense: students might gorge themselves stupid (in all senses) but only succeed in feeling unsatisfied and disgusted. It is a modular diet of chicken nuggets at best rather than (to give just one example which makes sense to readers of this journal) meaningful and lasting general education.

Coffield labels a variation on the first approach as corporate ‘strategic or cynical’ compliance. This involves playing the game but ‘bending the rules’ to shield institutions and students from the worst blows aimed by the opposing side.

A third route for colleges is pure survivalism by studying and mastering all the bureaucracy of funding, targets and inspection to stay in the promised land of ‘outstanding’.

Or, fourthly and in a way which will be most familiar to some, the answer is ‘resistance’ or ‘subversion’. You close the classroom door and do what’s best, what’s right and what works with particular students. Unfortunately Coffield can cite research by others (1) which shows that resistance may be widespread but it is patchy and unproductive. Indeed the performance management gurus may have reached inside teachers’ heads to make them feel ‘guilty or inadequate’ if they haven’t adopted the latest waffle. Coffield translates this process with some observed graffiti: ‘Help your

local police. Beat yourself up'. Or perhaps, to use Star Trek language, resistance is futile? Alternatively, Coffield notes here, colleges might usefully spend more time and resources in improving lessons rather than measuring them.

And then, fifth, there is the door marked 'exit'. Educators give up, get out or seek 'internal exile' because of stress, worsened conditions of service, and an end to classroom job satisfaction. Learning disappears in place of assessment. That's what gets results . . . the obsession with the chimera of 'outstanding TLA'.

But of course Coffield is optimistic. He has faith in the sector and in its staff. So the sixth and final response which he identifies is when educators become 'powerful, democratic professionals'. It is this response to which Coffield devotes most of the book, using relevant research, observations of the sector and its politics, and close contact with numerous and variously acknowledged sector staff and organisations. He notes that alternatives are possible; they exist in the Scottish and Welsh sectors whereas in England it is difficult to see how this might be possible when there are 'government cut-backs, colleagues are being made redundant, contact time for teachers is being increased, class sizes are rising steadily, and pressure to 'ratchet up' test results is becoming even more intense'.

So what is to be done? Coffield quotes John Hattie (2) to say that 'the greatest effects on student learning occur when teachers become learners of their own teaching and when students become their own teachers'. But, more than this, he agrees with Judyth Sachs (3) that a teacher's role of responsibility for the education of a group of students has also to encompass 'contributing to the school, the system, other students, the wider community, and collective responsibilities of teachers themselves as a group and the broader profession'.

This fight-back against reaction needs ideas and resources. Some of the practical and theoretical alternatives come from Coffield's co-authors: Cristina Costa, Walter Muller and John Webber. The chapter by the last-named describes in detail a practical, step-by-step approach to developing students' learning and thinking skills in an English college, acknowledging in the process that 'what the staff and many of the students are working to develop is nothing short of changing the culture of learning and, in particular, the nature of the partnership between students and teachers'.

Walter Muller writes about this culture of learning from the German perspective and puts the current crisis in education into a useful international context, as every country tries desperately to dragoon its young people in the service of the neo-liberal market. Thus educational institutions cease to help students 'to grasp as much of the world as possible and to connect

with it as intimately as one can'. Almost universally they 'are primarily regarded as economic instruments in the global economic competition that work best according to market and economic principles'.

The third of Coffield's collaborators, Cristina Costa, writes sensibly about technology in education, taking a sideways look at 'the development of learning contexts in web-based environments'. The enthusiasm with which organisations like, for example, News International are using technology 'solutions' as Trojan horses to industrialise the classroom makes many cynical. But here is a progressive 'ed tech' approach to TLA where 'we, as educators, need to shift our approach from content providers in the classroom to knowledge facilitators in a world of digital connections'.

Readers of *Post-16 Educator* are familiar with helpful practical suggestions for teaching a range of topics. These are often approaches tried and tested in colleges and, crucially, developed and shared in collaborative ways including via publication here. They don't claim to be 'best practice'. Coffield's chapter on 'best practice' notes that use of the term implies to some colleagues that their practice is inferior. His alternative, developed in various ways in the remainder of the book which also covers (for too brief examples only here) more effective use of motivation and feedback, is the proposal that tutors could 'commit themselves to becoming a fully research-informed profession, and one aspect of that commitment would be a move to a new model of professional learning based on JPD ['joint practice development']'.

In the final chapter Coffield provides various answers to the question 'can we transform classrooms and colleges without transforming the role of the state?' They are optimistic answers and he hopes 'that the ideas presented in this book will offer an outline of a better future than the one we are hurtling towards'. Indeed they do.

At the time I was writing this review our prime minister was using very un-prime-ministerial language to say he understood why many people wanted 'to give the 'effing Tories' a kick'. I will resist the temptation to say 'Oh, yes, we do, too!' and recommend a demonstration of how to do it concisely, with style and erudition, with passion and commitment. Watch this encounter between Frank Coffield and Michael Portillo. And feel glad that Frank is around to recommend such a healthy diet: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNath4vgDvE>

1. For example: Ball, S. J., Maguire, M., and Braun, A. (2012) *How Schools Do Policy: Policy enactments in secondary schools*. London: Routledge

2. Hattie, J. (2012) *Visible Learning for Teachers: Maximising impact on learning*. London: Routledge

3. Sachs, J. (2001) 'Teacher professional identity: Competing discourses, competing outcomes'. *Journal of Educational Policy*, 16, 149-161.