
Unprofessional bodies?

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In October 2014, FE's professional body, the Institute for Learning (IfL) closed, passing its legacy (some might argue a toxic bequest) to the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). The ETF is currently consulting within the sector about its proposed new professional services, as is (rather more quietly) the College of Teaching. But will these initiatives offer FE teachers anything very different from what was offered by the IfL?

The IfL: a wasted opportunity

George Bernard Shaw famously wrote that 'all professions are conspiracies against the laity', and for its many reluctant members the IfL came to represent a conspiracy against lecturers. Yet the sector's trade unions broadly welcomed the introduction of a professional body, arguing for its potential role in countering the increasing deprofessionalisation in colleges. In the 1990s, a Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) report exposed the fact that only one per cent of college budgets was spent on continuing professional development (CPD), and a subsequent UCU survey reported that much CPD was irrelevant to members, with almost a half indicating that their employers were either not at all or hardly at all effective at supporting staff needs with CPD opportunities. In addition to this general malaise, there was considerable evidence that inadequate CPD opportunities had contributed to sectoral inequalities for women, BME, LGBT and disabled staff. For instance, the Commission for Black Staff in FE reported a lack of appropriate support and development opportunities, and the Commission for Disabled Staff in Lifelong Learning highlighted inadequate adjustments, inaccessible environments, and exclusion from CPD. Moreover, a survey

commissioned by the IfL itself underlined the ongoing blight of casual lecturing contracts with the associated inequality of access for agency and part-time lecturers to staff development opportunities.

These remained live issues at the time of the IfL dispute, and even in the months preceding the crisis of confidence in the IfL, a UCU survey found that a majority of lecturers still favoured a professional body, but less than one fifth thought the IfL was fulfilling this role. So how did the early aspiration to create a CPD-supportive sectoral silk purse become so widely derided as a pig's ear? Retrospectively, the introduction of mandatory membership was at best ill-timed and at worst fundamentally ill-conceived. In 2004, the then IfL leadership argued that registration with the IfL might initially be a voluntary scheme for newly qualified lecturers: 'It's not something that can be imposed from above', as it is 'something the profession has to take a decision on for itself'. Similarly, the head of policy at the Association for College Management suggested that the introduction of a license to practice could not happen overnight, as the IfL 'needs to evolve first so it is offering positive incentives to professionals'. When obligatory membership was introduced in 2007, there were insufficiently credible incentives and benefits, and whilst this proved to be acceptable to the sector so long as the government funded the IfL, it became intolerable when the fee was imposed.

A further factor that led to widespread dissatisfaction with the IfL was its dual regulatory and membership functions: until the introduction of mandatory fees, the IfL's focus was almost exclusively on its regulatory role and relationship with government. Arguably, it should not be entirely surprising that he who pays the piper calls the tune, and perhaps the IfL's leadership anticipated investing more in membership issues once the body was funded by lecturers. If this was the intention,

another of the IfL's fundamental failures contributed to the crisis of confidence: it sold itself to the sector as being 'run by the members for the members' yet it lacked transparency (only late on did minutes become public or mechanisms for contacting representatives established). It suffered from an acute electile dysfunction: IfL 'advisory' council members exposed the IfL's democratic deficit at UCU's Conference at the height of the Professionalism War, suggesting that a powerful minority within IfL had progressed a discredited, managerialist model of professionalism: members were ineligible to send motions to the IfL AGM, and had no direct vote in the election of key national positions such as President and Chair. The IfL appeared incapable of engaging with criticism from the sector, which was now lobbying for genuinely democratic structures, engagement with members, and the prioritising of meaningful benefits.

Even in its own 2009-14 plan, the IfL reported concerns in an earlier survey indicating that many lecturers felt remote from the IfL to the point of feeling bullied into joining, stating that it is often unusual for professional bodies to 'accurately reflect the voice of their members because these voices are often mediated by the leadership'. There were attempts by the IfL to admit mistakes, such as its failure to offer professional development services and training directly to its members, but generally the IfL leadership's Pythonesque insistence that the haemorrhaging of sectoral confidence had just been a flesh wound was consistent with a long-standing organisational learning difficulty. Ultimately, the IfL had many opportunities to reform over years, informed by the views of members, and the storm of criticism precipitated by the fee imposition could have stimulated transformation: clearly it did not have the capacity to modernise itself into a body fit to be representative of the sector. There is no doubt, however, that many talented professionals and committed individuals invested a great deal of time and intellectual energy in the IfL's creation and development; that it failed nevertheless should give us pause for thought in relation to any new professionalism initiative.

Insanity

Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results: the IfL's membership had collapsed from 200,000 to 18,000 by the time it closed – hardly a compelling vote of confidence in the notion of a new (especially a mandatory) professional body funded by its members. Perhaps as a sector it is time to take advantage of some of the nuanced analyses of

professionalism that responded to the IfL crisis and moved the debate forward, such as Norman Crowther's paper 'Contesting Professionalisms' and Dan Taubman's *Towards a UCU Policy on Professionalism*. Several chapters in the forthcoming book *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* also deal with aspects of democratic professionalism. These contributions might assist us in taking an informed approach to grappling with several key questions:

- 1. Do we need a professional body in FE?
- 2. Is there an appetite for a professional body amongst lecturers at this time?
- 3. Is mandatory membership a consideration (now or in the future)?
- 4. How might such a body be funded?
- 5. How would a democratically representative ethos be established?

Deficit

Despite its recent consultation over its Professional Membership Service, the ETF is not, at present, promoting itself as a membership-led body. If it was, we would then be back into the arguments about democratic deficit widely heard in respect of the failed IfL. But this is not where we are. A membership service is what it says it is: a service for members, its membership consumers of services rather than active participants. Similarly, an advisory body, such as that currently engaged in consultations with the ETF, is not a decision-making body but one that merely advises the decision-makers. As things stand, the proposed membership service will be merely an adjunct to the ETF, a means of co-opting teachers' professional aspirations, and so legitimising that organisation's claim to speak on their behalf, without the messy inconvenience of democratic process. Although the ETF CEO is on record that he opposes mandatory membership, according to one of the lecturers on the ETF advisory group two of the questions currently being explored by the ETF consultation include how much it could charge, and whether membership should be compulsory. The extent to which professionalism is highly contested must be acknowledged. Colleagues in Wales were never subject to IfL Mandatory membership, but from April 2015 they will be obliged to register with the EWS (Education Workforce Council). Registration is likely to cost £18 in the first year, deducted from salary; but the EWC concedes that the fee is likely to rise steeply in subsequent years. Who knows, too, what a post-General Election education minister will say on all of this? Mandatory membership of a

professional body for FE may be off the agenda now, but could easily become a live issue again.

The ETF initiative does raise the issue of what kind of professional body FE teachers need and want. Of course, what is needed and what is wanted are not always one and the same. There is no agreement that teachers need (or want) a professional body at all. Moreover, what teacher professionalism actually means is a source of ongoing tension in the sector, usually encoded in arguments about performance management, lesson observation, the value of CPD or pay. At the same time, the voice of practising teachers has become increasingly marginalised in the sector, in contrast to those of senior 'leaders' who often left the classroom long ago or were never classroom practitioners in the first place. In the prevailing dispensation, teachers are 'developed' rather than taking charge of their own (shared) development, and instructed rather than enabled as active participants and decision-makers. It is not surprising that teachers often feel that there is little point in having a voice when no one seems actually to listen to them.

However, we need to be careful not to indulge in victimology, or assume that teachers are too overworked and too worn down to be concerned with an esoteric notion such as 'professional identity'. We may work in the Cinderella sector but we should not allow ourselves to be Cinderellas hoping that our Fairy Godmother or Prince Charming (a benign principal, a new Chief Inspector, a different Secretary of State) will make things right. If we are genuinely concerned about being *done to* rather than *doing*, it's up to us to reclaim our professional identity for ourselves.

Vision

Crucially, there needs to be some way of representing the democratic and activist vision of professionalism. By definition, this has to be self-constituted, and will only happen if there is felt need among teachers for a genuinely participatory body in which they can link up, and discuss and share their ideas, concerns and practices. Such a body could help bridge the practice/research divide, encouraging teachers to engage with research and researchers to have a greater sense of accountability to practising teachers. In addition, a democratic, activist professional body might help us link classroom practice to the bigger issues of politics and policy, our responsibility to our students to our wider civic responsibilities. In this way, we could start to challenge some of the values and assumptions that prevail in the sector and shape its

language and practices. Here, we would include the naïve belief that success is simply a product of aspiration, that consultants can script the 'perfect lesson' and that there is value in the vague notion of 'employability'. Instead, we need an honest acknowledgement of the complexities and tensions inherent in education and its relationship to the world in which we live and work.

Time for a new, democratic professional association?

There is, as yet, little evidence that either the ETF- or the College of Teaching-projected models of professionalism are any better than that peddled by the IfL. It is for this reason that a number of FE professionals across the country (including combatants from both sides of the IfL Civil War) are tentatively exploring the possibility of a new democratic association of FE professionals.

Our starting position is that attempts to *professionalise* the Further, Adult and Community Education and Skills (FACES) sector have too often adopted a deficit analysis, with an assumption that tutors are *not professional*, and with the lack of a fully participatory, democratic ethos. However, in a forthcoming chapter to mark the centenary of Dewey's *Democracy and Education* (1916), Frank Coffield argues that teacher professionalism has been undermined with the abolition of the General Teaching Council (GTC) and the collapse of the IfL.

'Right from the start the IfL failed to establish itself as an independent organisation, free from government influence. It could not even get its own name right. Its core function was to further the development of tutors in FE, so it should have been called the Institute for Tutors or Teaching. That said, it did much good work . . . It needs to be replaced, preferably by a body, established by FE tutors themselves, run on democratic lines and with the professional knowledge and expertise to stand up to both government and management. I offer as a working title: Tutors' Voices . . .'

Unions

The proposed association is categorically not intended to replace any former FE professional bodies, or to encroach on the vital work around pay and conditions of sector trade unions, or to replicate the service functions of government-funded sector bodies. Neither do we have any appetite for a role around such issues as professional regulation. It is intended that the association should become, in time, the collective voice of powerful, democratic

professionalism for the FACES sector. Should there be any attempt in the future to compel lecturers into a fee-paying, mandatory professional body, our members should be well placed to resist such a move.

As a starting point, we offer the following discussion as to why an association of professionals (as distinct from a professional body) might be important; and ten proposed founding principles:

Voice of democratic professionalism: to enable FACES practitioners to have a strong, democratic, collective and autonomous professional voice on issues of practice and policy.

Research and pedagogy: To encourage a network of practitioners and researchers committed to a culture of discussion, sharing, reflective inquiry and joint practice development informed by research and linked to policy

Influence policy: To defend and promote well-resourced vocational, academic and community-based education and comprehensive lifelong learning and education for democratic citizenship. To champion different types of knowledge (propositional, procedural, craft knowledge) and the three dimensions of professionalism (knowledge of subject; knowing how to teach it well and how students learn it; and involvement in local and national politics as they affect education as a whole).

Proposed founding principles of Tutors' Voices:

1. **Democratic** (both as its fundamental operating ethos, and as an ethic of professional service to students: our professionalism should both promote expertise in TLA and foster independent, critical thinkers who are also active citizens in our democracy)
2. **Inclusive** (open to all FACES practitioners, and interested HE researchers, HE FE teacher trainers etc.)
3. **Representative** (decision-making / elected posts in due course solely open to chalk-face FE teachers)
4. **Participatory** (encourage engaged associates, and principally organised by lay activists)
5. **Egalitarian** (actively promote equality, and with no grades of membership, or 'patrons')
6. **Transparent** (establish electronic archives of all key association documents)
7. **Independent** (of government and with no formal links with any sector body, trade union etc.)
8. **Collaborative** (committed to a culture of discussion, sharing, reflective inquiry and development informed by research and linked to policy)
9. **Campaigning** (with the professional knowledge and expertise to challenge college managements,

sector bodies, and government) 10. Non-mandatory (now or ever, as a non-negotiable founding principle; initially free, no cost to join, but in the long run the association may need to have a subscription basis to be sustainable).

We welcome responses to this proposal, supportive or otherwise. You can contact us to join the debate, or express an interest at TutorsVoices@mail.com.

Conclusion

Perhaps the lesson of the professionalism debacle in recent years is that an alternative ideological position is urgently required, one that promotes and empowers lecturers via a model of professionalism that embraces a democratic and collegiate ethos. Such an approach may not necessarily require the establishment of a formal professional membership body, but the lesson of the IfL's failure is that any proposed body that does not have these qualities is unlikely to be supported by lecturers in FE. In our view it is time to wrest back the professionalism agenda for lecturers at the chalk face.