

# FE teachers, broken funding and dissent

**Rob Smith**

FE is reaching a tipping point. As part of the Government's on-going austerity measures, cuts to adult learning budgets are having an enormous impact on colleges across the country. The future seems particularly bleak. Today, in Birmingham where I live, three out of the four main FE colleges are in redundancy situations with more than a hundred jobs being axed in each. Two snapshots:

- Last week a senior manager from one West Midlands college described to me how in the coming year, having made all the efficiencies that were possible, he would have to cut further. He likened this to the amputation of a healthy limb. 'We've got no choice as an institution. But we must be under no illusions: what will go will be productive (in the Government's terms), efficient and valuable courses staffed by experienced and well-qualified staff. It's like having to cut off one of your arms'.

- Two weeks ago at our partnership moderation day, I asked one of our teacher educators whether the Study Programme approach to funding had eased some of the pressures exerted on teachers to pass students in order to keep achievement rates high. The response was forthright and dismissive: 'Eased? You're joking. What's happening at the moment is immoral. It's not good for students, teachers, the college or employers. If anything, the pressures are worse'.

If these snapshots stood out to me as exceptional and alarming narratives of doom deriving from particular colleges during difficult times that would be one thing. But unfortunately they are not isolated incidents. Both colleges are doing comparatively well in the current climate (they are not, as far as I am aware, amongst the fifty colleges in 'financial difficulties' – Cooney 2015). Neither college is known for having a maverick or despotic culture of managerialism. Indeed, the budget cuts simply seem to have accelerated a widespread trend across most colleges that positions funding capture as a sovereign priority, the primary concern of all college employees, the key measure that over-rides all other concerns, including . . . real teaching and learning.

So this isn't just about austerity. It's about the marketisation of the sector and the way it has been organised since incorporation. FE teachers have found themselves increasingly pushed into complying with cultures that demand they put the financial interests of the colleges above all other concerns, even to the extent of recruiting inappropriately and passing students whose work does not warrant it. In straitened times, when redundancy might be invoked in response to any perceived dip in performance, these pressures are felt even more strongly.

There are different ways of looking at this phenomenon and the teachers who are caught up in it. One view is that incorporation itself has created a culture and pressure within colleges which, over a period of time and often through a process of attrition, recultures them by removing dissent and affirming employees (teachers or managers) who are prepared to put corporate (college / financial) loyalty before all other considerations (Smith 2015). Shain and Gleeson (1999) wrote memorably about 'strategic compliance', in which FE teachers hang on to their values while complying with the more minor administrative demands of their professional role. Other writers, writing about education more generally, focus on an antidote to prevalent performative cultures, by arguing for radical professionalism (Gunter 2001) or democratic professionalism (Sachs 2001) – these are useful templates though what those identities might mean in practical contexts isn't always clear.

Alternatively, Stephen Ball (2003) talks about the teacher's 'soul' being endangered. The metaphor is a powerful one in the way it communicates the profound nature of the assault on teachers' personal values within their day to day work. Ultimately, the use of 'soul' suggests that what is at stake is the very identity of the teacher, the reasons why they went into teaching and the reasons why they continue to teach.

Whichever viewpoint you prefer, all of them suggest that there is something that stands outside the myriad regulatory technologies in educational

workplaces (performance management, CPD, appraisal, OFSTED inspection, in-house observation). As such, this something is unmeasurable by the prevailing culture of managerialist positivism (Smith and O'Leary 2014). An important aspect of this teacher feature is a transcendent ethic of care, and an interest in providing an educational experience that cannot be reduced to a student passing an assessment. In other words, most FE teachers are in the profession because they experience intense rewards when engaging in the social and interactive process of teaching and learning through which they see students developing and growing. This process, lying at the heart of all educational experiences in schools and colleges, if steered by skilful teachers, taps into the very fount of human potential.

What's important to understand here is the extent to which FE teachers (but also teachers in schools) are increasingly alienated by the constant monitoring and assessment activities they are forced to impose on students, not in furtherance of their education but in order to satisfy market mechanisms that are driven by a central government thirst for data. This is why SATs were boycotted and abandoned for 14 year-olds in 2008. This is also a key reason why teacher unions have been threatening to boycott tests for four year-olds on entry into school. Teachers are left demoralised and disengaged by these processes which appear to be tangential to the real educational project. For the student, the process is no less alienating: it transforms education from an experience that stimulates and challenges them into spoon-feeding and teaching to the test.

Here I want to pause and draw comparison with two historical examples of dissent. My intention is to be provocative. The first example is with the impact of centralised state control (of virtually everything) within Eastern Europe in the latter part of the twentieth century. What's interesting about the current impact of marketisation on FE teachers is that it ends up resonating strongly with discredited systems of social organisation from that era. My example is from personal experience rather than a history book. My brother was married to a Czech woman. Her father, Miro, was a talented engineer at the time of the 1968 uprising when the Soviet tanks trundled into Prague and Soviet-style government was enforced. When the organisation of the engineering plant was taken out of the hands of engineers and handed over to Party bureaucrats, this resulted in several things: at an economic level, as everyone was paid the same by the state, any incentive for Miro and the other employees to work hard (or even at all) was removed and the engineering works ground to a halt; secondly, unless

Miro joined the Party (and there was no chance of that), he had no hope of promotion or influencing the way things were done. In Miro's case, this situation led to him, as a talented and experienced engineer, putting minimum effort into his job and instead pouring all his energy into activities outside work. For him, this meant carving and building the mechanisms for multiple intricately wrought cuckoo clocks.

Miro's story is an illustration (an extreme one, admittedly) of how, when the state gets skilled people to work to state-sanctioned goals, monitored from the centre, their agency is undermined and their human capital is under-utilised. In other words, it's a squandering of human potential. The fact is, if any system is sufficiently alienating for the people working within it, human potential is wasted. In my view, this resonates with what is happening to FE teachers under the current funding regime: compliance to a broken system and a production line approach to teaching and learning are being privileged, and this is leading to a decline in quality that is understood by every teacher but invisible to the auditors.

My second example draws on the historical record of religious dissent in England and Scotland and is intentionally more controversial. In the 1680s, the English monarch was attempting to reassert the primacy of Anglicanism. Scottish Covenanters were persecuted to force them to 'return' to Anglicanism and to adopt a standardised form of worship which recognised the English king as the head of the Church, standing between them and God. This was intrusion into personal beliefs and practices that they sought to resist at every turn. Many were prepared to and did die for their beliefs. Kaler (2008) records how two Covenanter women, an old widow called Margaret McLachlan and a teenager called Margaret Wilson, were staked out in the estuary near Wigtown on the west coast of Scotland. The elder woman was positioned closer to the sea so that, when she drowned, the young one would have the chance to repent and pledge allegiance to the king. Both women died rather than do so (1).

For me, this version of dissent relates to the purposes of FE. Ever since incorporation in 1993, FE has been used by successive governments to embody and articulate a particular purpose for education. For FE more than schools, this has been an articulation of the sentiments expressed so trenchantly by James Callaghan in his Great Debate speech of 1976. In a nutshell, Callaghan argued that the education system had to be much more carefully and closely aligned to work and the needs of employers. In the absence of any national youth policy, FE's role has become totally bound up in negotiating the transmission between school and

work for many young people. Incorporation has only focused this effort more sharply.

The latest policy to create three million apprenticeships, seemingly at the expense of the 'general FE college' (FE Week 2015) would seem to be just the latest example of the privileging of this 'instrumentalist' purpose. It has become a common sense idea that FE is there to deliver skills for the economy. At the institutional level, though, as with much policy implementation, colleges cultures intervene. There, this grand, national purpose is systematically distorted into an institutional form: the harvesting of funding in order to secure the college's financial future. Interestingly, both national and institutional purposes ignore student choice and reduce students themselves to cogs in a bigger, identity-crunching machine.

I would like to voice my dissent about this. I do not agree with the simplistic idea that FE can be easily manipulated to serve the needs of UK plc. Furthermore, I don't agree that that should be FE's sole purpose, and in my view the last twenty plus years illustrate how chaotic government intervention in this regard has been. For me, there are different, broader purposes for all education.

I also believe there is evidence of dissent amongst FE teachers across the country. Tutor Voices recently published a Bill of Rights for FE teachers which is an expression of dissent. Dissent takes other, more worrying forms as well. At the end of March, an ATL survey suggested that four in ten school teachers were leaving the profession within a year (see Weale 2015). We haven't had a similar survey just for FE staff but it seems highly unlikely that the picture would be very different. In fact, it might be even more alarming. This poor NQT retention rate signals that these teachers were not prepared to abandon their values and comply with the joint impositions of national or institutional purpose as neither gives true meaning to the work that they do. This is perhaps our modern equivalent of being staked out in the estuary: teachers are leaving their teaching jobs, often with no job to go to in an uncertain economic climate. Because they have had enough.

Finally, it's worth remembering that dissent is about alternatives and the current situation requires us to engage in an imaginative and intellectual task. We need to use our experience of current failings to think through what a system that is in harmony with teachers' values and properly enhances their potential might look like and how it might function. So that when the Wall finally comes down and Divine Right is discredited, we are ready to move forward to implement a system that works.

1. My thanks to Terry Deary, author of the *Horrible Histories* series, for this reference.

### References

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## Tutors' Voices conference

*The issues raised in this article, with others affecting FE practitioners, will be discussed at a residential conference on*  
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