

What it means to be a 'professional' in Further Education (FE) in England has been the subject of on-going debate over the last two decades. In an attempt to codify professionalism, the previous New Labour government developed a package of reforms for the FE workforce, which were crystallised first by the introduction of a set of professional standards and qualifications for those teaching in the sector (FENTO 1999; LLUK 2006) and then a new common inspection framework under Ofsted. These reforms reflected a political desire to monitor and improve FE teachers' professional skills and knowledge, and prioritised teaching and learning as the main vehicle with which to drive the 'continuous improvement' agenda. Classroom observation or what is commonly referred to in FE as the 'observation of teaching and learning' (OTL) subsequently emerged as a pivotal tool for evaluating and measuring improvement, whilst also seeking to promote teacher learning and development at the same time. Drawing on recent research into the use of OTL in FE colleges, this paper focuses on two case study colleges in the West Midlands whose contrasting OTL practices serve to exemplify what I refer to as 'expansive' and 'restrictive' approaches to professionalism i.e. 'opportunities' and 'barriers' to professional learning respectively. Through the lens of OTL, the paper examines the role that this particular intervention plays in shaping notions of professionalism among staff working in these two colleges.

The experiences of staff in these two colleges are explored through the narratives of three stakeholder perspectives i.e. senior managers, observers and observees. The research data presented are taken from semi-structured interviews carried out as part of a wider mixed methods study into the use and impact of OTL on the professional identity, learning and development of FE practitioners (O'Leary 2011). Given the enormity of the data generated and that some have been discussed elsewhere (e.g. O'Leary 2012), the scope of this paper is restricted to examining qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews of participants.

The two case study colleges presented here were chosen because they provide such rich, contrasting examples of the differing contexts, cultures and practices associated with 'expansive' and 'restrictive' approaches to OTL. The paper argues that it is time for a move away from the predominantly restrictive ways in which observation has been used in the sector to date i.e. largely as a performance management tool, to more expansive models that seek to prioritise teacher learning above all else. It acknowledges that such a move would undoubtedly go against the grain of current normalised models of graded OTL and signify a bold step in re-defining its use in the sector. It remains to be seen whether or not colleges are prepared to take such a step, but equally the paper concludes that to ignore the distorting and counterproductive consequences of this initiative is surely not an option for policy makers and practitioners alike committed to the on-going improvement of teaching and learning in FE.