

The teacher educator experience: “Guardians of the Pedagogy”?

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Abstract

This chapter adopts an auto-ethnographic approach, focusing on teacher educators’ practice on in-service Initial Teacher Education (ITE) courses across a Partnership based in the West Midlands of England. It explores some of the issues faced by these HE in FE teacher educators through the lens of ‘vocation’. After an initial section to contextualise ITE for college teachers, the chapter will contrast the current model with teacher preparation in the Community College, Technical Career sector and at senior high school level in the US. While there are some similarities in terms of the policy discourse (in both countries highly critical of teacher ‘quality’), there are major differences particularly in certification for teaching students aged 16+. The terrain of teacher education in England – strewn with the remnants of multiple ‘legacy’ qualifications is discussed, as are the implications of the Lingfield Review for the professional identities of teachers in further education. The chapter will draw on literature about the impact of market regulators in education in then focuses on a range of issues that are impacting on the work of FE teacher educators, not least the tensions

experienced by them in upholding a set of pedagogical values that do not always harmonise with the culture of their workplaces. The chapter introduces the notion of the gulf that exists between the student teacher learning environment and the student teacher practice environment and explores the sectoral and policy pressures that this originates in. The work of these practitioners is discussed as they mediate their students' early experiences as teachers, focusing on the steps they take to guard their students' individuality and creativity against and the negative experiences they encounter on teaching placement.

Context

In the last decade in England, routes into teaching school leavers who are 16+ has undergone a major upheaval. From a situation in which all such teachers were expected to gain a teaching qualification, in 2012 Lord Lingfield's report into professionalism in further education removed all compulsion (BIS 2012). The routes into the sector are now deregulated and largely shaped by market demand, which often translates as the growth and contraction of subject areas according to shifts in funding. That said, most further education teachers still undertake Initial Teacher Education (ITE), either once employed (in-service) or in a one year post graduate course (like that explored by David Wise in Chapter 4). Since 2014, in-service teachers have been divided loosely into three groups: unqualified staff, those who study a set of government endorsed qualifications as organised by their employer and those whose college belongs to a partnership with a local Higher Education Institution (HEI). The courses they study range from those that are very focused on achieving learning outcomes to those that are founded on critical reflective practice.

The shifting sands of the market landscape in England provide an interesting contrast with the situation in other countries. For example, in the US, a teaching certificate for community college and postsecondary teachers is not mandatory, although a bachelor's or master's degree

in a relevant subject specialism is required. Interestingly, community colleges in the US are seen as embedded in local communities and as important providers of teacher education programmes with their ability to address a teacher shortages and to supply teachers from under-represented groups (Coulter and Vandal 2007). In contrast, the Australian context sees VET teachers being required to hold a Certificate IV in training and education (Guthrie et al 2011). In England, post Lingfield, the situation in further education colleges hovers somewhere between the two. In some vocational subjects, unqualified teachers may be appointed; in others, they may be qualified below degree level. But in the US and now English contexts, despite this movement away from mandatory teacher certification, there is evidence of a push for greater accountability of teacher education programmes (Cochran-Smith et al 2016 and see Gallagher and Smith chapter 12).

The neoliberal instrumentalisation of further education in England is highly visible in a policy discourse that utilises the notion of the ‘FE sector’. The use of this abstract term contributes to conditions that make it acceptable to impose generalised, decontextualised meanings on very heterogeneous provision. Lefebvre’s triadic conceptualisation of space as ‘conceived space’, ‘perceived space’ and ‘lived space’ (Lefebvre 1991) can provide some theoretical insights into this kind of abstraction. Lefebvre argues for a blurring between physical and mental space – seeing the duality as a false one and the categories as interpenetrating. For Lefebvre, conceived space links to abstract space as:

an apparent subject, an impersonal pseudo-subject... and – hidden within it, concealed by its illusory transparency – the real subject, namely state (political) power... (Here), lived experience is crushed, vanquished by what is ‘conceived of’. (Lefebvre 1991: 49-51).

In this sense, further education – conceived of as ‘the FE sector’ – can be viewed as an ‘abstract space’: generalized and instrumentalised by policy makers. This abstract space is reified through the production and use of performance data: colleges are required to quantify teaching and learning in order to draw down funding, transforming social processes into numerical form so this simulation can be fed back into the policy-making cycle (O’Leary and Smith 2012, Smith and O’Leary 2013). This is the abstract space in which teaching and learning is conceptually reduced to the ‘delivery’ of a curriculum that produces students with the skills needed by industry and who are therefore ‘employable’. Through abstraction, the significance of context is dismissed as performative relations require interaction at the level of the symbolic and through the co-construction of simulations. In this way, the abstract space of ‘the FE sector’ articulates with the spoon-feeding / transmission approach to education inasmuch as ‘surface’ data is taken to signify the complex diversity of teaching and learning experiences.

Against the idea of abstract space (or rather nestled within it), Lefebvre counterposes ‘differential space’:

abstract space carries within itself the seeds of a new kind of space. I shall call that new space ‘differential space’, because, inasmuch as abstract space tends towards homogeneity, towards the elimination of existing differences or peculiarities, a new space cannot be born (produced) unless it accentuates differences. (1991: 52)

Lefebvre theorises how even totalising discourses are unable to exclude the potential re-appropriation by ordinary people of abstract space. If the abstract space of the ‘FE sector’ is founded on a conceptualisation of teaching and learning that corresponds to the delivery of a curriculum and the transmission of knowledge, then the differential space that is recuperable

within it is space in which teaching and learning is something more and different. In this chapter we will propose that the differential space of further education can be a space in which critical pedagogy is espoused. This approach to teaching and learning originating in Freirean pedagogy (Freire 1995) connects to transformative approaches (Duckworth and Smith 2017) and views students in a holistic way, as reflexive and dialogical co-constructors of meaning; it views teaching successfully in further education as depending on a critical understanding of the policy context in which it takes place. In turn, this means that ITE courses for college teachers necessarily involve a ‘conscientisation’ of student-teachers. This theorisation enables us to understand how the version of further education envisaged in the neo-liberal imaginary of policy makers contains within it transformative learning opportunities and environments.

This chapter will focus on the experiences of teacher educators belonging to one ITE partnership in the West Midlands. It will explore the tensions experienced by them in upholding a set of pedagogical values that do not always harmonise with the culture of their workplaces. We are not claiming that all college ITE programmes are founded on the principles of critical pedagogy but rather that the relative status of teacher education teams can be taken as a cultural barometer in any given college because teacher educators often find themselves positioned at the interface between data-driven college processes and the attitudes and values associated with critical pedagogy and transformative learning (Duckworth and Ade-Ojo 2014, Duckworth and Smith 2017). In ‘expansive’ (Fuller and Unwin 2004) college environments, teacher educators are ideally positioned to act as disseminators of good practice and even to facilitate spaces for discussion around what effective pedagogy is. However, in more ‘restrictive’, managerialist college environments, they are likely to find themselves either marginalised as ‘outliers’ or assimilated into quality assurance (qa)

mechanisms and deployed in order to enforce staff compliance with performance data production procedures (the tension between these roles is explored by Victoria Wright and Theresa Loughlin in Chapter 13).

This chapter will foreground the voices of teacher educators from a college and university partnership and will attempt to represent their experience of functioning at the meeting point of these distinctly different value systems.

Values: countering symbolic violence

The partnership teacher educators identified values as lying at the heart of their ITE practice. These values had a significant impact on their work and their approach to it. These teacher educators' values transcended neoliberal prescriptions for college education. They believed that further education has a broader impact on society than just through raising skills levels. The role of colleges as contributing to social cohesion and community well-being as well as goals connected to social justice also featured strongly in the values set.

One way of viewing this value set is to see it as a response to the symbolic violence that the 'FE sector' visits upon learners in objectifying them in human capital terms i.e. as repositories of skills required for the nation's economic needs. Learners often arrive in further education colleges with negative prior educational experiences. Young people's experiences of schools often leave them believing they are 'not academic' or 'thick' and can attach stigma to their home culture and backgrounds. Bourdieu and Passeron see education as asserting the legitimacy of the dominant culture on members of dominated groups, classes and individuals, and as imposing on them by the inculcation of exclusion, a recognition of the illegitimacy of their own culture. Labelling is one aspect of this where symbolic violence takes the form of an ongoing assessment of 'ability' that shapes social (and institutional) interactions between teachers and students. Symbolic violence then can be viewed as an outcome of the way

teachers relate to and interact with students. The teacher educators in this partnership saw it as their role to counteract this symbolic violence. To gain a clearer picture of how this could be undertaken, we need to revisit Bourdieu's original conceptualisation of symbolic violence.

Bourdieu and Passeron (2013: 3-68) see education as imposing a standard culture whose values reflect the social structure and the power relations that underpin it. In other words, education is instrumental in perpetuating a stratification of individuals in a way that helps to replicate social inequality. Teachers play a role in this through 'pedagogic action'. Pedagogic action for Bourdieu and Passeron constitutes symbolic violence because it entails the imposition of arbitrary meanings and cultural values on learners. Pedagogic authority is necessary for pedagogic action to take place. They see pedagogic authority as:

a power to exert symbolic violence which manifests itself in the form of a right to impose legitimately (which) reinforces the arbitrary power which establishes it and which it conceals. (Bourdieu and Passeron 2013: 13)

Bourdieu and Passeron argue this means there is a 'twofold arbitrariness' in pedagogic action (ibid. 5-6). The first arbitrary is the power underpinning pedagogic authority; the second is the 'cultural arbitrary' that the pedagogy seeks to impose. In other words, for Bourdieu and Passeron, pedagogic action involves a set of power relations in which authority is established and then, using that as a basis, curriculum content can be imposed. They appear to dismiss the possibility of any pedagogy which foregoes symbolic violence, as they see no pedagogic action as 'culturally free' (ibid. 17). That said, their model is very transmission-orientated. It adopts a view of educational experiences as those in which learners are passive recipients rather than being dialogically engaged in meaning-making.

So how is it possible to theorise teaching and learning and step outside this notion of symbolic violence and the ‘twofold arbitrariness of pedagogic action’? The critical pedagogy espoused as the preferred approach by the college teacher educators in this partnership addressed the twofold arbitrariness of pedagogic action through critical reflective practice. The first arbitrary: the power underpinning the pedagogic authority is something that is addressed through the egalitarian relations that the teacher strives to establish. The classroom where ITE courses convene is a space for sharing experiences and for joining with others to reflect in a community of practice. The egalitarian ethic within this between teacher and students is a cornerstone of this approach. The second aspect, the ‘cultural arbitrary’ that pedagogic action seeks to impose according to Bourdieu and Passeron, is addressed through critical reflective practice itself and through the biographical elements of ITE programmes that centre curricula on student identity and the construction of a teacher identity. Holistic approaches, that view students’ experiences as a learning resource and see narratives and (written) critical reflection as a primary tools in development, exemplify a pedagogy that eschews the symbolic violence as theorised by Bourdieu and Passeron. But while teacher educators may have the ability to shape spaces in which teaching and learning take place, this doesn’t make these ‘differential’ spaces immune to the pressures of pervasive neoliberal cultures. The next section looks more closely at some of these pressures.

From differential to dominated space

The Partnership teacher educators had extensive experience of inspections and a consciousness that student-teachers needed to be equipped to deal with the performative environments that many colleges have become. Two key areas were viewed as important in this regard: Ofsted and placement college observation schemes.

The use (or not) of lesson plans provides a point of intersection for the different issues. The use of lesson plans is another example of where practice in ITE provided a sharp contrast to practices in performative college environments. In ITE, the lesson planner can be used to make visible the student's thinking as regards teaching and learning strategies – in other words as a reflective tool designed to illuminate the choices student teachers make in the way they organise teaching. To date, the impact of Ofsted has been mainly around teachers producing formulaic lesson plans that ticked the appropriate boxes and name-checked the latest policy fad (e.g. Equality and Diversity or 'safeguarding'). In the last two years however, Ofsted has retreated from erstwhile prescription and signalled a move away from favouring lesson plans. The change has caused consternation. One teacher educator explained:

When Ofsted said they wanted to see 'evidence of planning' and not necessarily a lesson plan, there was discomfort and incredulity in college. How could it possibly be true/safe to teach during an Ofsted inspection without a lesson plan? But a lot of the documents we produced were just for them, e.g. folders and folders of material, for example, on enrichment activities undertaken, community involvement and 'green' projects.

This is an example of self-consuming performativity which functions to produce the abstract space of the 'FE sector'. In the same way that 'teaching to the test' subverts and makes meaningless assessment as a measurement of learning, teachers spending inordinate amounts of time preparing paperwork specifically for Ofsted can be seen as actually detracting from the improvement of teaching and learning. Ofsted's influence as an integral part of the machinery of market accountability has led to colleges recording and evaluating absolutely everything, a habit which takes time away from teaching and learning and certainly increases the pressures on teachers. But this reaction also points to the dominated space that further education has become. Ofsted's unquestioned legitimacy as an assessor of further education

means that when it comes to the judgements made during inspections, less prescription provides greater room for the arbitrariness that is the hallmark of Bourdieusian symbolic violence.

Observations and in particular graded observations have become an aspect of unintelligent accountability that has signally failed to contribute meaningfully to positive change in further education for the last two decades (see Chapter 14). Rather, there is a case for viewing graded observations as playing a pivotal role in the production of further education space in deficit terms in order to provide the pre-conditions for the operation of a marketised system.

The Ofsted Report *Teaching, learning and assessment in further education and skills – what works and why* (Ofsted 2014) provides good illustration of the abstraction of ‘the sector’ and was a source of much grim amusement in colleges. For example, the report states that some colleges had “a culture driven by policies, strategies and documentation and not by practice in the classroom” (ibid: 4). This was acknowledged as a ‘statement of the bleeding obvious’ as these cultures were perceived to have arisen *in direct response to* Ofsted inspections and their requirements for ‘policies, strategies and documentation’. The statement suggests an inability on the part of Ofsted to understand that Ofsted itself is the author of the entrenched practices it now wishes to see abandoned. This epistemological blindness and the paradoxes it gives rise to surface elsewhere in the report, for example, when a need is identified to:

ensure that the results of rigorous observation of teaching and learning are used to manage teachers’ performance and provide relevant staff development (Ofsted 2014: 5)

This passage betrays a failure to understand that the ‘management of teacher performance’ may not be compatible with the ‘expansive’ cultures of teaching and learning and ‘managed

risk-taking' previously mentioned. In other words, it speaks to the spoon-feeding delivery system, cloaked in a technical pseudo-scientific discourse centred on 'how the brain works' or 'how learning works'. In this context, the judgement that there is "a lack of rigour in evaluating the quality of provision" (Ofsted 2014: 4) once again positions Ofsted as an educational regulator aligned with the cultures and metrics-mindedness of managerialist positivism that have become pervasive amongst senior management teams in further education settings.

Partnership teacher educators were keenly aware of the pressure exerted on teachers by some colleges' in-house observation schemes. Teachers were perceived to be under pressure to perform and graded observations added considerably to this. The impact of these observations was all the more apparent because it contrasted so sharply with the developmental focus of their ITE observations. One teacher educator reported:

Recently, one of my very able PGCE students, who has sailed through the course observations, lapping up the feedback and happy to engage in reflective dissemination of the lesson, was in tears because she was so worried about her college observation. She knew that a poor grade could be the end of her teaching career. As her course mentor, her teacher, and a decent human being, I spent an hour with her building her confidence and bringing her to a level where she was able to feel able to cope. To see a strong and capable teacher in this state and seriously considering leaving teaching is disheartening to say the least.

This passage suggests the fragility of the inchoate teacher identities that student teachers find tested in some college settings. It also suggests that potentially strong teachers may be lost to colleges because of the trauma of the transition experience from studentship to employee. Furthermore, it underlines how critical pedagogies in ITE that counteract the symbolic violence that appears to be a widespread feature of teaching and learning in further education

settings are boundaried by classroom walls. For partnership teacher educators, how these pedagogies were sustained by student and newly qualified teachers in their first years of employment was an abiding concern. Before we address this concern, the next section will look at the teacher educators' perceptions on the other pressures facing college teachers. Overall, the partnership teacher educators felt that good ITE provision was facilitated when a supportive culture and common expectations were shared between the student teacher, the ITE team and the student teacher's own organisation. But this was undermined by a number of key pressures.

The devolution by management of extensive, time-consuming bureaucratic tasks onto teachers could be interpreted as a sign that management is not 'taking care of business'. But such a perspective hinges on a particular view of management as having a functional role, a role in managing and coordinating data and data collection without allowing these activities to colonise cultures of teaching and learning. Sadly, in most colleges, and due to the saturation of the sector with discourses of efficiency and productivity, devolution of this kind of activity is common. A key counter-metric in an 'expansive' teaching and learning environment might be the extent to which college managers free teachers up to teach rather than embroiling them in the production of often meaningless accountability data.

The pressure placed on newly recruited (and qualified) staff in terms of teaching load and performance expectations in their first year of teaching was viewed as a significant problem by the teacher educators. One consequence of the performance management approach newly qualified teachers were subjected to was that teacher educators spent a lot of time helping them to 'fire-fight' in order to 'keep their heads above water'. The teacher educators saw themselves as role models for the student teachers and as such, felt it was important to act in

a way that showed a confidence in their values and professional identities. This was easier in contexts in which pockets of critical pedagogical culture had been established but was more difficult in contexts in which their roles had been colonised by quality discourses.

The critical reflective practice that is the primary vehicle for developing a teacher's identity on ITE courses provided a potential means of support. In some settings, students' critical reflection was online and involved the use of an interactive blog which the students and teacher educators used as a discursive and dialogical tool. Blogging helped students to move their thoughts and ideas forward, as well as providing a 'differential space' for dialogue which helped the teacher educator to understand the individuals they were working with more deeply. This space is described by Lefebvre as:

The space of a different (social) life and of a different mode of production... that straddles the breach between science and utopia, reality and ideality, conceived and lived. It aspires to surmount these oppositions by exploring the dialectical relationships between 'possible and 'impossible'. (Lefebvre 1991: 60)

It is this space that offers a resource of hope (Williams 1989) for teacher educators and newly qualified college teachers alike. In the final section, we will elaborate on how this hope is sustained.

Looking ahead

With the drop-out rate of teachers at a ten year high in England (Weale 2016), this suggests that colleges should see it as their responsibility to nurture their new and qualifying staff.

While in some colleges, teacher education teams are positioned as overseers of 'quality' processes, an alternative and more constructive approach sees them as providing a focal point for ongoing critical reflection for all (but particularly new) staff on what it means to teach in further education settings. The work of Ernst Bloch positions hope centrally as a key motive

force in history through which we as people can act on reality. In the current, grim context of further education in England, rekindling teachers' hope seems vital. For Bloch, hope is:

“indestructibly grounded in the human drive for happiness and... has always been too clearly the motor of history” (Bloch 1986: 443).

The joy, passion and achievement that student teachers experience in their teacher education courses are emotional rewards that motivate and inspire. These are the experiences that sustain teachers in their working lives and which lead them to enthuse and inspire the learners in their classrooms. The hollowed-out teaching role of spoon-feeding and metrics contrived by the neoliberal *weltbild* can offer only an etiolated and ersatz alternative. In the current economic and political conditions, it may be that hope has to be re-learned:

Hope has to be learned.... It does not just come about automatically but is the produce of experience, failure and resistance to an everyday acceptance of reality.... Hope therefore learns but it also teaches as well as constitutes its own conditions. (Thompson 2013: 7)

Teacher educators can play a crucial role in the (re)kindling of hope. The critical reflective practice that is the primary vehicle for developing a teacher's identity on ITE courses can extend beyond that. Online communities are disruptive of the kind of institutionally-boundaried cultures that the market relies on but that pose such a threat to sustaining cultures of critical pedagogy. The teacher educators whose views feature in this chapter find sustenance in the extended critical community of the partnership. Online networks make this a possibility not just for new but for all college teachers. Partnerships for critical pedagogy offer a technology to escape from and coordinate resistance to 'dominated space'.

To return to the national and international context, it is significant that despite the removal of mandatory certification, there is still an appetite for teacher qualifications in further education colleges in England. This may be down to a more highly developed systems of accountability, but it might also speak to the notion that however economised colleges have become, there is still a strong cultural memory of the distinctness and value of pedagogical knowledge. Our claim is not that all college ITE educators provide the kind of educational experience that we have written about here, but that this space is a key battleground for challenging and subverting the processes of symbolic violence that the current neoliberal policy context presents as normal and legitimate. In that sense, teacher educators can and should be allowed to act as Guardians of the (Critical) Pedagogy in a broader historical movement to reclaim further education as ‘differential space’.

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