Chapter 10

"Feeding the Monster": Vocational Pedagogy and the further education policy present

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Abstract

This chapter begins by comparing current models and structures of vocational education in the US with the vocational offer in colleges in England. While policy in the US has traditionally shied away from vocational 'tracking' because of the perception that this entrenches social division, increasingly, community colleges and other 'technical' educational institutions are seen as a way of marrying academic and industry-related education. Drawing on a research project involving teachers of vocational subjects from a number of different colleges in the West Midlands region of England, this chapter explores the reality as experienced by practitioners behind the recent policy anxiety about vocational pedagogy. It reveals how despite political rhetoric, policy initiatives to raise standards in vocational teaching and learning may not be yielding the results intended. It presents FE as a troubled landscape in which interventions under the Coalition government (2010-2015) targeting an improvement in vocational education appear to have diluted practitioners' ability to deliver a rise in the quality of provision.

The failure of these policy intervention is indicative of the disconnect between policy makers and practitioners which appears to be a key characteristic of the relationship between government and

further education providers. The chapter concludes by focusing on existing accountability systems and how these, in effect, contribute to produce a simulated picture of colleges' activities as dictated by the marketised environment, suggesting that it is this relationship rather than that between vocational teachers, vocational students and their learning that requires some critical attention and improvement.

Introduction

In England, the histories of colleges of Further Education are rooted in local communities within towns and cities. Prior to incorporation in 1992, these colleges were often called technical colleges – indicative of their role in providing post-16 educational courses more closely connected to employment than those offered by schools. Day release courses were on offer through which young people who were already in work were able to gain a qualification, often subsidised by their employer. A slow process of mergers, takeovers and (more recently, since Area reviews) closures has meant that the number of colleges has reduced from 427 to 325 in 2016 (AoC undated & 2017). International comparisons with the English context provides illuminating insights. In the US, the terminology used to describe vocational (or 'career and technical') education courses and colleges varies between states and institutions. To that extent, federal structures and state autonomy precludes a centralised definition or funding model which results in a patchwork provision that, by definition is attuned to local / state needs. That said, career and technical courses are perceived to carry a stigma and have experienced a reduction in funding comparable to

English further education courses in the last decade (Jasper 2016). In Australia, the situation is different inasmuch as market arrangements and changes in funding have resulted in little change in the number of providers over the last two decades. The mix of colleges and smaller private providers appears to mirror the English context although Australia appears to have a much higher number of providers (Korbel and Misko 2016). Burke's research (Burke 2015) provides evidence for a decline in quality that maps against an overall decline in public funding.

In England in recent years, policy makers' interest in vocational education and, more specifically, vocational pedagogy has intensified. Major policy interventions in the last two decades include the introduction of General National Vocational Qualifications (1994), Entry to Employment (2003-2010), Train to Gain (2006) and the 14-19 Diploma (2008) among others. In addition, college teachers might be forgiven for believing that a reinvention of apprenticeships is the prerogative of every new government: in the last fifteen years apprenticeships have twice been revisited and relaunched (Modern Apprenticeships (2001) and (new) Apprenticeships (2010). Indeed, with the recent introduction of an employers' 'levy' (DfE 2017), apprenticeships have become the key policy vehicle recasting further education as a delivery system for producing 'employment-ready' (young) people to service the nation's economic needs.

This resuscitation of apprenticeships appears in large part to be a response to some heavy criticism about the relevance and effectiveness of vocational courses. Notably, in 2011, the

Wolf report (found that many young people were being "steer(ed) into programmes which are effectively dead end" (Wolf 2011: 8). It also commented on the funding driven nature of vocational courses in FE:

> 14-19 education is funded and provided for (young people's) sakes, not for the sake of the institutions who provide it. (ibid. 8)

The report painted a picture of over-involvement on the part of government in colleges' curricula through 'micro-management' resulting in 'repeated, overlapping directives, and… complex, expensive and counterproductive structures' (p9). Furthermore, the report criticised the information produced by further education providers and by implication central government and suggested that current (marketised) arrangements have led to cultures that do not produce neutral information in a clear and transparent way. Casting doubt on low level vocational qualifications developed by colleges that had no traction with employers, the report appealed for the qualification and funding systems to be 'simplified dramatically'. In 2013, the policy focus on vocational education again sharpened with the publication of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning report (CAVTL 2013) which stressed the importance of 'a clear line of sight to work' and the 'two way street' (between employer and educational provision) as key ingredients in delivering effective vocational pedagogy.

This chapter will draw on research data gathered from and with vocational teachers from colleges in the West Midlands in the years since these reports were published. It will look at the policy response to these reports and the impact in colleges of this response.

The present and presence – a conceptual framework

Lefebvre uses the terms 'presence' counterposed against 'the present' in his theoretical attempt to integrate space and time as important components of a critique of 'le quotidien' or everyday life (Lefebvre 2004).

> We must ceaselessly come back to this distinction (opposition) between presence and the present…. The present simulates presence and introduces simulation (the simulacrum) into social practice. The present (through representation) furnishes and occupies time, simulating and dissimulating the living. Imagery… succeeds in fabricating, introducing and making accepted the everyday. A skilfully utilised and technicised form of mythification (simplification), it resembles the real and presence… but it has neither depth nor breadth nor flesh… presence is **here**… With presence there is dialogue, the use of time, speech and action. With the present… there is only exchange and the acceptance of exchange, of the displacement… by a **product** (emphases in original), by a simulacrum. The present is a fact and an effect of commerce; while presence situates itself in the poetic: value, creation, situation in the world and not only in the relations of exchange. (Lefebvre 2004: 47)

From this passage we can see Lefebvre presenting a picture of 'the present' as reality infused with and determined by ideology. The present displaces and substitutes itself for presence, and simulation (data, images, myths) underpin this displacement. Simulation here echoes the theorisation of Baudrillard and his notion of 'hyperrealities' (Baudrillard 1994) but develops it by situating it within bigger organisational and contextual frames. We will use 'the present' and 'presence' as a conceptual antithesis to illuminate the research data from the vocational teachers. 'The present' as we will use it in this chapter is a term that attempts to capture the mental construct of further education conjured into being by (neoliberal) government policy discourse and enacted in colleges that operates on the consciousness and through that the work of further education teachers. To that extent 'the present' is constituted of notions (given common-sense status), abstractions and generalisations that draw on the neoliberal imaginary (Fraser 2003) that currently shapes further education provision in England.

Policy context

In 2013, the coalition government announced the introduction of new 16 to 19 Study Programmes. Study Programmes were the latest in a long line of policy interventions and initiatives intended to address the shortcomings of vocational education in England. As with other vocational policy initiatives in the past, Study Programmes were presented as an educational and training cure-all for a range of problems:

By linking the education system much more closely to the world of work: with more relevant, respected qualifications, more employer influence over courses, and more focus on English and maths for all students, we are – at long last – ensuring that all young people, no matter what path they choose, get the best possible start in life. (Hancock 2013)

This speech by the then Skills minister presents the 16 – 19 Study Programmes as a necessary and long-awaited intervention that, superficially at least, appears to offer a clear and straightforward solution to a current and often long-standing problem.

Typical of announcements that contribute to further education policy in England, the launch of Study Programmes betrayed a worrying amnesia as regards the recent past. There is no mention of this being the latest attempt in a long list of half-successes and failures. The speech exemplifies the workings of further education policy discourse in the way it seeks to consolidate a seamlessness between the declared intention behind the policy (to ensure that all young people get 'the best possible start in life') and its enactment. The complexities of real life experience in colleges as college staff respond to the policy and try to set up, recruit to and then sustain these new courses, are displaced and hidden. In this example, policy discourse concertinas time in such a way as to instantaneously enact the initiative. It isn't just that there is a gap between 'crude and simple' policy and "the 'wild profusion' of local practice" (Ball 1994: 10) but rather that one aspect of 'the policy' present in further education is that through its

announcement, policy is magically enacted and this displaces the messy contingency of implementation in colleges.

Our Research

This chapter comes out of a research project that addressed the burgeoning policy anxiety about "our failure to provide world-class vocational education" (Hancock 2013) on the part of the Coalition Government (2010-15). Central to our project was a belief that practitioners should be involved in research and writing about their own practice. This belief was a response to a perceived absence of practitioner voice in some of the recent policy literature (e.g. CAVTL 2013, Lucas *et al* 2012). Much of that literature consulted with practitioners and absorbed their views but in most cases these views were not directly represented, *verbatim*. Nor were practitioners directly involved in undertaking or writing up the research. Our project differed on both counts. Built into the project was a research strand that aimed to build up an evidence base of *chalk-face data* from this regional group of practitioners. Participants were given access to recent literature about vocational pedagogy and asked to relate this to their experience. Cultures of competition and accountability tend to isolate colleges and teachers from each other so one of the key social gains emerging from the project was the development of a community of practice of vocational teachers. Not only did this community of practice provide a network of mutually supportive individuals in which practice could be shared and new approaches developed but, we aimed to engage project participants in research and writing activities in order to counteract the unrealistic representations of FE that are a result of marketisation and policy rhetoric.

In these ways, the project involved the production of critical knowledge that i) illuminated the lived experience of vocational teachers in FE and that, ii) provided an under-narrative to the market-inflected data whose production is now a feature of work in colleges and which sustains further education's 'policy present'. The project's foregrounding of practitioner voices was not intended to champion a particular 'voice discourse' (Moore and Muller 1999). Instead, this project sought to represent data from a shared understanding of social reality as experienced in localised settings (see Young 2008: 24-34). In that sense, the representation of participants' experiences is an antidote to the simulations of further education produced by performance data as part of the current model of market accountability. Along with schools, hospitals, the Police and other sections of the public sector that have had regimes of 'market accountability' forced upon them, the further education sector has developed cultures of managerialist positivism that prioritise favourable data above all other considerations. This approach to leadership and management has been described as follows:

> Managerialist positivism equates to the purposeful production and representation of data that deliberately excises inconvenient truths better to serve the interests of individuals/institutions acting within the 'fitness landscapes' of the marketised public sector. (Smith and O'Leary 2013: 246)

The simulations this data constitutes provide an example (in Lefebvre's terms) of 'the present' in further education colleges.

The findings

In this section we will present some of the findings from the research project and offer a commentary. We have divided the findings in a series of connected thematic areas to reflect the participants' main concerns.

i)   Performance data

At the root of many of the issues raised by the vocational teachers in the project were current funding arrangements and their associated bureaucracy. While the teachers involved in the project had no objection to accountability, the data-driven cultures prevalent in their colleges were viewed as counter-productive. Instead of driving positive change, quality assurance processes and the data production associated with them were seen as alienating 'regimes of truth' (see Smith 2005) contributing to teachers' already onerous administrative burdens.

Tracking students' progress through regular assessments is an example of the kind of data-work that has come to feature so prominently in college teachers' duties. Marie talked about her college's use of an online tracking tool for individual students called 'promonitor':

We have to do this thing on pro-monitor where basically we set all of these targets

continuously: it's constantly monitoring.

Target setting for individuals is an aspect of the managerialist technology that ensures 'delivery' of the course objectives. That the process is supported by on an online system contributes to a sense of centralised scrutiny and the pervasiveness of cultures of performativity. More than that however, there is an understanding that the simulations produced in this case by the promonitor tracking data is more important than the actuality of student progress. Jobs depend on the data being 'right' – whatever the state of teaching and learning.

According to project participants, 'quality' and administrative systems were undermining the very processes they were supposed to be monitoring. Teachers characterised this as finding themselves locked in a cycle of expending more and more time and energy to appease a leviathan with data, leaving less to focus on the real world the data was supposed to represent. As one participant put it:

FE providers cannot quantify learning by bums on seats, student numbers and

success rates. It now appears we are doing an injustice to our students, they are

not statistics. These students chose to come to us for their learning.

The production of performance data in order to create these simulations of the productivity of vocational education was viewed as a gruelling inevitability, an aspect of their work that they referred to as 'feeding the monster'.

Funding cuts

Project participants reported that in the autumn of 2013 and 2014 college managers talked to staff about the need for increased 'productivity'. Productivity in this context is a term only made possible by the annually-based funding of colleges. It is made visible by the performance data that teachers are required to produce. More than two decades of incorporation have resulted in an economisation of the consciousness of college teachers. This is a materialisation in thinking, *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977) and even disposition that is a feature of once-public-sector, now-marketised work under neoliberalism. One Media Studies participant, Lionel, stated:

> I have just been to a planning meeting and (this manager) is telling me we have got to work harder because of the cuts and so we've got to deliver this and that but we do that anyway…. One of the guys, a manager in the meeting said 'you're going to have to do more for less' and there was an implication… that we could be teaching over 46 weeks of the year. But if we extend past 23 hours of teaching then the quality of the delivery is going to suffer… it's suffering already because of the admin work we all have to do.

The episode recounted above or something like it probably occurred at staff meetings in FE colleges across the country in the summer and autumn of 2013 as a result of a cut to adult funding that meant a loss of 10% to some college budgets. In colleges, the kind of adjustment to timetables and to the curriculum on offer to students caused by reductions in funding is not a new phenomenon. In fact, college teachers in general are used to timetables being expanded and course hours being reduced on a year by year basis. It's important to understand that because of the grip of 'the present' the budget cuts can only intensify the necessity of 'feeding the monster'.

The passage also illustrates Lionel's concern about quality and how this is threatened by the imposition of increased productivity. This feeds into discourses about the 'flexible' FE teacher. Another participant, Marie, reflected:

> The rhetoric from managers now is not 23 hours contact time per week, it's that you are contracted for 37 hours per week, which leaves the situation open to interpretation.

It is a sign of the current breakdown in shared understandings between practitioners and policy makers that in FE colleges 'quality' has taken on a meaning that links it to the production of (often spurious) data. This is a prime example of 'the present' in further education: while the production of this performative data preoccupies and burdens teachers, the single most obvious impact on quality – the imposition of

increased teaching hours on staff – is ignored. In the literature about vocational

pedagogy, much of it published since 2008, it is extraordinary that there is no mention

whatever of this contextual influence on the quality of vocational pedagogy brought

about by the national reduction in college budgets.

iii) **Recruitment**

According to the CAVTL report (2014) a consideration of the needs of potential

students in conjunction with a knowledge of the demands of industry lay the

foundations of successful vocational pedagogy. This positions enrolment and

recruitment as crucial points at which colleges engage socially and educationally with

students for the first time. Participants agreed that it was imperative that colleges help

students to access a programme which reflects their interests to keep them engaged

through courses that combine both theory and practice. However, during discussions

amongst project participants, a very different picture of enrolment emerged in which

recruitment was more about the college selecting the student – in some cases despite

their interests.

> It's now a case of capturing the student, they are money…. Don't let them walk
>
> out of the door. (Diana)

Clearly, this was an area of college activity likely to have been influenced by the

current funding crisis as, faced by reduced budgets, colleges went to great lengths to

recruit as many students as possible. Diana's comment suggests that teachers were encouraged to recruit at all costs, irrespective of the 'industry demands' or 'learner needs'. This approach to recruitment is a clear example of the concerns raised in the Wolf report that "14-19 education is funded and provided for (young people's) sakes, not for the sake of the institutions who provide it" (Wolf 2011: 8).

But there is also a sense that this approach to recruitment undermines the status of vocational education in general. Vocational programmes can be seen (sometimes by FE teachers themselves) as a dumping ground for learners who are perceived as not academically able. This is one consequence of the continuing academic / vocational divide that is a structural feature of the English education system (Hodkinson 1989). Recruitment as represented in the contribution above consolidates this divide by objectifying students. In some instances, colleges that need to fill spaces on particular courses may steer young people in a particular direction but this is portrayed as students 'choosing' vocational subjects deemed as 'easy' to pass. Here, the FE market is seen to operate in favour of the 'producer' college and the student-consumer's choice is shown to be shaped by the needs of the college. This unequal, commercially-inflected relationship is a result of the current funding regime. The aim for vocational programmes should be that learners eventually want to go in to that industry; if they are recruited to courses that do not interest them, then the whole process is short-circuited. If recruitment is guided by funding considerations and fails to balance

students' interests with the needs of industry, then the real benefits to students, industry and to society at large will be lost.

iv)   **Counter-productive policy intervention: the example of mandatory English & maths**

In addition to the structural problems covered above, vocational teachers in FE colleges have also had to endure policy intervention that has impacted on their practice in detrimental ways. In the autumn of 2013, the introduction of a mandatory entitlement for all 16 to 19 Study Programmes to include English and maths had a dramatic impact on participants' work practices. This arose seemingly in direct response to an OECD report that according to Hancock:

> found that 16-24-year-olds in this country are among the least literate and numerate in the developed world. (Hancock 2013)

In response, the new 16-19 Study Programmes aimed to:

> ensure that students who don't get at least a C in English and maths GCSE by age 16 must keep on working towards them.

One project participant, Andy, went into great detail about how this had impacted directly on vocational tutors and their focus on vocational pedagogy:

> Little has changed with regards teaching in the vocational area, what *has* changed is tutors are now having to deliver maths and English…. (Vocational teachers') concern now is that success rates encompass both functional skills and their vocational area which is increasing stress levels…. Tutors feel that these areas should be carried out by specialists in that field. Imagine asking a maths or English teacher to teach construction! It wouldn't work! Yet here we are nearly three years down the line from the Wolf Report, with vocational tutors doing their best to teach maths and English…. tutors are facing a huge challenge to get their students to achieve.

It is tempting to view these circumstances as an outcome of the Lingfield Report (BIS 2012) that removed the requirement for college teachers to have a teaching qualification. Lingfield's deregulation then can be seen as contributing not to raising standards or bolstering teachers' professional identity but rather, the reverse as diluting expertise and the importance of a subject specialist knowledge base:

> Why isn't the emphasis being directed at teachers who presumably hold degrees in these specialist areas? I believe the answer is not to train existing staff, but to employ specialists in this area to deliver quality. After all, you would not ask a maths teacher to build you a house….

Andy's contribution highlights a yawning gap between policy rhetoric and policy implementation: the disjunction between the exaggerated policy announcement and the reality of the changes as experienced by practitioners on the ground. The lack of congruity between the two, the superimposition of announced policy over the more complex, chaotic actuality (or 'presence') in colleges constitutes 'the present' for further education providers. In this case, Hancock's policy intervention with its 'focus on English and maths for all students' through which the government is 'at long last – ensuring that all young people, no matter what path they choose, get the best possible start in life', has translated into a scenario in which teachers have been forced to teach subjects in which they are unqualified. Andy also felt aggrieved that FE colleges were being forced to take remedial action in response to perceived 'failings' in the secondary sector:

> From previous experience and conversations with our students, it is clear that maths and English were not the most popular of subjects at school, especially maths. Now, (non-specialist) FE tutors are being expected to deliver in thirty six weeks what secondary education could not do in five years…

Andy's comments here point up once more the failings in the current model of accountability through funding that fragments students' educational narratives into chunks that are artificially viewed as somehow independent from each other.

Conclusions

Overall, the project revealed the way that vocational education policy initiatives to raise standards in vocational teaching and learning contributes to an already troubled landscape. While the latest reboot of apprenticeships is still bedding in, it is clear that the Study Programme policy initiative has failed to address the fundamental issues connected to the funding model and regimes of data-for-accountability. This has impacted on the ability of these reforms to gain real traction and bring about real change for the better in vocational education in England. The key issues in vocational education in England compare to those in Australian and the US contexts: funding levels, maintaining 'quality' and dealing with the stigma of lower status qualification routes all resonate. What's also clear is that market arrangements seem only to have exacerbated these problems.

The message from this particular research study is that the focus needs to shift away from seeking a philosopher's stone that can alchemise vocational pedagogy and provide the dramatic gains in quality sought by successive governments. While the existing funding arrangements (and cuts) continue, the constant flow of policy interventions will be deformed by the financial priorities of colleges operating within a quasi-market and the efforts of vocational teachers will continue to be undermined. Because of the continuous policy churn in colleges it seems appropriate to develop the notion of 'the present' to make it more reflective of the further education context. Policy change is so perennial and all pervasive that to talk of the *further education policy present* as a permanent feature of 'the present' as experienced by college teachers is warranted. The *further education policy present* is an aspect of the conditioning of teachers of vocational qualifications in further education.

Simultaneously, it is a condition in itself: indicating that 'feeding the monster' – activity that feels futile and self-defeating and meaningless for both teachers and learners – has come to dominate the work and colonise the 'presence' of vocational teachers in colleges in England.

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