On the Making and Taking of Professionalism in the Further Education (FE) Workplace *

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Synopsis

This paper examines the changing nature of professional practice in English Further Education[1]. At a time when neo-liberal reform has significantly impacted on this under researched and over market tested sector, little is known about who its practitioners are and how they construct meaning in their work. Sociological interest in the field has tended to focus on FE practitioners as either the subjects of market and managerial reform or as creative agents operating in the contradictions of audit and inspection cultures. In challenging such dualism, which is reflective of wider sociological thinking, the paper examines the ways in which agency and structure combine to produce a more transformative conception of the FE professional. The approach contrasts with a prevailing policy discourse which seeks to re-professionalise and modernise FE practice without interrogating either the terms of its professionalism or the neo-liberal practices in which it resides. In addressing this issue the paper critically examines the cultural and constructed nature of FE professionalism, from 'below and above', in the wider context of accountability in civic society.

[1] Further Education Institutions are similar to Institutes of technical and Further Education in Australia and, to a lesser extent, Community Colleges in North America. Different systems of FE exist in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This paper refers exclusively to the English context.

Background

The paper engages with wider debate about the nature of professionalism as a servant of modernisation or as transformative agent of democratic accountability and citizenship (Etzioni, 1969; Johnson, 1977). As recent research literature suggests, the professional world has altered considerably over the past twenty years. (Bottery, 1996; Whitty, 2002) This shifting terrain has been theorised in a variety of ways, in relation to increasing conflict between professionals and managers, the deprofessionalisation of public sector workers, the commercialisation and globalisation of the professional as a corporate employee, and the contrived relevance of professionalism as a 'third way' (Helsby, 1999). Whether professionalism constitutes a self-serving feudal anachronism within late modernity or something more potent in transforming institutions and civic society, is hotly contested.(Euram, 2004) Increasingly the blurring of public and private sector occupations, the emphasis on skill over occupation and overlap between management and practitioner activities, suggests that traditional attempts to define professionalism, removed from the context of its practice, offers limited insight to its meaning (Gleeson and Knights, 2004).

As others have noted the proliferation of job specifications, titles and practices *within* broad fields of professional practice, in health, education and business, indicates the complexity of making generalisations *across* cognate fields of professional activity (Stronach et al, 2002). This does not invalidate the search but rather demands a rethink about the way professionalism is analysed, theorised and researched. This paper looks at the further education practitioner as a 'case in point' exploring the ways in which such professionals mediate asymmetrical discourses of power in conditions which, simultaneously, liberate and circumvent their room for professional manoeuvre. The analysis is complicated by the proliferation of job titles which characterise FE practitioners work (e.g. lecturer; tutor; key skills co-ordinator; work based assessor; section leader; advanced practitioner); the diverse range of academic, technical and vocational programmes that take place in and out of college and the changing

ratios of contract to full-time staff, reflecting increased 'casualisation' of the sector (Findlay and Fiddie, 2003).

Introduction

The paper focuses on renewed interest in the way professionalism is being reworked from within and outside the conditions of further education practice. It explores two contrasting notions of the FE professional, as either the recipient or agent of change, reflecting the wider positioning of professionalism as a socially defined or situationally constructed process. The former denotes issues of structure, in terms of how the professional is 'framed' by external factors and the latter focuses on agency in the way professionals construct meaning in the situated contexts of their work (Hoyle,1995). Whilst the two are not mutually exclusive categories there exists a *dualism* in sociological thinking between agency and structure around the way professionalism is researched and understood (Grace, 1995). As a consequence this has led to two polarised camps of theorists: between those that subscribe to a voluntaristic perspective that privileges subjective agency, and those that follow a deterministic stance that elevates structure over action in the way external conditions of the market, work and organisational reform impact on professional practice (Knights and Wilmott, 1999).

In addressing this dualism the paper critically examines various ways in which FE professionals intersect agency and structure in their work. Whilst recognising the inherent dangers of drawing broader parallels between FE and other areas of public sector provision, there is justifiable reason for treating FE as a 'case in point' (Robson, 1998). Despite its peculiarly English connotation, FE has much in common with attempts by governments worldwide to reform post-compulsory education and training (PCET) within a global discourse of economic improvement, re-skilling and social inclusion (Elliott, 1996). In this context English FE represents a 'prototype' of one of the most market tested sectors of public education provision in which quasi market interventions have radically altered democratic accountability in favour of government, business and corporate interests (Ranson, 2003; Hayes, 2003). Whilst ostensibly FE

colleges are independent of central and local government control the sector operates within a context of licensed autonomy and its professionals treated as 'trusted servants rather than as empowered professionals' (Avis,2003; p329). Most recently the creation of this market has been bolstered by the introduction of a national learning and skills strategy, reinforced by an audit and inspection regime through which standards of FE provision are judged and assessed (Holloway, 1999; Hyland and Merrill, 2003). According to a recent Guardian leader "……..no other area of education is so frequently audited." (The Guardian, 5/3/02)

Yet despite the rapid passage of market and managerial reform of FE sociological and practitioner research in the field has, with some notable exceptions, remained largely undeveloped (Ainley and Bailey, 1997; Huddleston and Unwin, 2002). Much of the prevailing literature has tended to focus on organisational, administrative and policy issues rather than on pedagogy and professionalism reflecting entrenched distinctions between the management and administration of FE, and its practice at classroom and workshop level (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). In addressing the *relational* aspects between the two this paper focuses on who FE practitioners are and how they make sense of both dimensions in the context of their work. It addresses such questions as: how do FE practitioners construct professional meaning in their work; how does such experience change perceptions of professionality; and what new constructions of professionalism are emerging as a result? (Avis et al, 2002).

In addressing these questions the paper draws on data derived from the Transforming Learning Cultures in FE Project (TLC-FE Project 2001-2005) which is part of the wider ESRC TLRP Programme[2]. As the project title suggests, its main focus is on learning as a ***cultural*** rather than as primarily an individualised cognitive process. In theoretical terms the TLC-FE project emphasises the contextual elements which frame the ways in which FE practice

[2] We acknowledge funding received from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for the Transforming Learning Cultures in Further Education Project [Award no: L139251025] to which this paper is related. The TLC – Fe Project (2001-2005) is part of the wider ESRC Teaching and Learning Research Programme (TLRP) www.ex.ac.uk/sell/tlc.

intersects personal and public issues of policy and practice (C.Wright-Mills, 1968).To support this approach the project draws on Lave and Wenger's (1991) ideas of professionalism as a situated activity embedded in 'communities of practice,' and Bourdieu's notion of habitus and field -in this case FE policy and practice – where implicit relations of power and identity define professional work (Bourdieu and Waquant,1992)[3]. We are also interested in the way Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital informs wider understanding of how professional dispositions shape, and are shaped by, structures of power, citizenship and social inclusion. (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990; Bourdieu 1977).

As recent studies have noted this cultural perspective is not common in FE and PCET research (Bathmaker, 2001). The prevailing tendency of research in FE has been to focus on either FE's pragmatic contribution to the local economy and skill provision, or on cognitive psycho-social aspects of learning (competences, motivation theory and learning style) driven by contingencies of social inclusion, audit and inspection. (Colley, James and Tedder 2002) This dominant technicist model portrays FE in functional terms as a provider of courses, programmes and services to 'end users' (employers, government, private agencies and professional bodies), with little reference to how targets and outcomes are developed or understood by those engaged in their production. In this paper we are more interested in the way professional knowledge is constructed around practitioners' experiences and how, in turn, such knowledge mediates external messages of policy in making sense of FE practice. The paper is divided into four main sections: the first considers the changing policy environment of FE in which two settlements, market and audit culture, combine to 'frame' professional practice. The second and third sections draw on data from the TLC-FE Project, and explore vignettes of practitioner

[3] The research in this paper draws on interviews, observations, diary entries, meetings, college sources, papers and data undertaken by ourselves and other members of the TLC-FE Project research Team in the period September 2001-September 2003. The main data is based on interviews with sixteen practitioners (known as participating tutors in the TLC project working across sixteen learning sites {courses, programmes, learning centres and units} across four colleges.) The sixteen practitioners were each interviewed on four occasions between 2001-2003 from which we have edited and analysed selected data from interviews, observations and diaries. We are particularly grateful to Helen Colley, Madeleine Wahlberg, David James, Phil Hodkinson, Mike Tedder and Kim Diment (including anonymised participating tutors in the partner colleges) for allowing us to shatre additional project data produced by them.

experience in relation to flexibilisation and social inclusion. The final section, examines the implications of such analysis for understanding the increasingly politicised context in which FE professionalism finds itself in civic society. Here we refer to FE's more central role in public policy than in regenerating the UK economy. We turn first to consider some key aspects of policy change in the FE sector.

The Changing Ecology of FE

For much of its history there has been a strong ideology of uniqueness about the FE sector. This is evidenced in its espoused difference from other education sectors reinforced by dedicated FE services (FEDA, LSDA, FENTO, LSC)[*], localised patterns of teacher education and, prior to incorporation, staff employed on their own 'Silver book' contracts of employment (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). In the academic literature the same distinctive view of the sector permeates, with its own funding and inspection regimes, professional bodies and lack of research culture. In essence, FE is unified by being different (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). It is not like Higher Education (feet on the ground, working with difficult learners, proper 'on the job' teacher training, serving the local community, and misunderstood.) It is not like schools (adults, part-time students, rescuing school failures, diverse academic-vocational programmes, strong industry-business links) It provides work-based training but is not like private training organisations (more professional and is *the*, not *a* 'Cinderella' Service. In recent times, an interesting example of this *rhetoric of difference* has surfaced in relation to research. The Learning and Skills Development Agency (LSDA), for example, has developed its own Journal and a series of conferences dedicated to FE research with the common cry that FE research is 'different' from the ivory-towered variety found in most Universities (Ainley and Bailey. 1997)

In the past decade this stereotyped image of FE as a unified and distinct sector has been challenged by a combination of social, economic and policy changes (Green and Lucas, 1999). Following the FE and HE Act (1992) which initiated

incorporation and the independence of colleges from local authority control (1993), FE has become increasingly mainstreamed within a national learning and skills sector (DfES, 2002; 2003, a & b). The reasons for this are many and diverse. At one level, the competitive effects of globalisation, pressure on public funding, changes in technology, employment and demands for a 'skills revolution' have, over time, impacted on the FE policy field (DfES, 2002). At another, demand for greater social inclusion of a wider cross section of the population in post-compulsory education, skill development and access to higher education, has influenced the rapid diversification and mass expansion of FE (Avis et al, 1996). No longer marginalised between school and HE, FE has become part of a seamless policy web, connecting schooling, higher education and work related learning across the 14-30 age range (DfES, 2003 c).

Alongside such policy shifts sit the largely un-researched nature of FE practice as it is experienced by students, practitioners and managers at the centre of FE modernisation. Whilst there is agreement in the research literature that there has been a significant shift in the management, funding and institutional framework of FE since incorporation, there is little evidence of any major transformation in teaching and learning in a sector which remains largely a mystery to academic and policy communities alike (Simkins and Lumby, 2002). At the root of this mystery is a crisis over the identity of FE as it responds to contradictory messages of economic rationalism and principles of social inclusion, including recognition of those professional and pedagogic values which underpin its practice. In contrast with wider research and public debate over what schools and universities are for, there is no such contested understanding of FE which, in terms of middle class aspiration, lacks voice and policy appeal. According to DfES figures 90% of FE colleges have significant teacher shortages and 61% report retention difficulties among existing staff (DfES, 2003,d)

FE and 'the third way'.

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* see Acronym section

Since its incorporation[4] in 1993 FE has become part of a wider discourse of modernisation designed, ostensibly, to reconcile New Labour's 'third way' political ambitions (socialism and Keynsian democracy), with the neo-liberalism of 'new right' reforms under Thatcherism. (market individualism, devolution and choice). According to Wood (2003) such third way politics embody a synthesis of public and private values which, in Gidden's view (1998) seek to rationalise the discipline of the market with principles of social justice. Other analysts have noted a strong sense of policy continuity between successive Conservative and Labour Governments in which the use of audit and inspection regimes is the most visible (Travers, 1998). In Hall's (1998) view, 'Mrs Thatcher had a project [and] Blair's historic project was adapting to it' (Hall, 1998. P14; Gleeson and Husbands, 2003) A notable feature of that adjustment has involved transforming a self serving public sector, riven by restricted practices, into a more responsive and free market enterprise (Pollitt, 1993; Hayes, 2003).

How such asymmetrical principles of modernisation, based on 'regulated de-regulated' market reform, find expression in the contradictory conditions of FE practice is neither straightforward or uncontested. On the one hand FE operates in a quasi competitive market environment alongside other agency and private sector providers whilst, on the other, it is licensed, funded and controlled by the same state agencies and providers (LSCs, OFSTED, ALI, QCA, DTI and DfES) that regulate the learning and skills sector, of which FE is a part (Pollitt, 1993; Power, 1994; Hayes, 2003). As a result the further education sector displays significantly more regulatory control than related areas of public sector provision in health care, schools, HE, social housing, police, local government and social services.

"Yet the further education sector shows no palpable signs of regulatory capture. The relatively weak location of the sector's professional associations makes regulatory capture less likely and, moreover, regulatory control more likely. Consequently government are more likely to use regulatory agencies as a key vehicle to reform further education" (Cope et al, 2003. P.204)

[4] Incorporation refers to legislation (FE:HE Act 1992) which freed FE institutions from local authority control, granting the sector powers of self-regulation and marketisation.

Eleven years after Incorporation, which freed FE from local authority control (FE/HE Act 1992), further education is framed by two interconnecting policy settlements (Holloway, 1999). The first arises from the de-regulated impact of funding (FEFC) and market reform and, the second, from the implementation of a national Learning and Skills Sector (LSC) policed by audit and inspection regimes (ALI/Ofsted), designed to deliver targets of continuous improvement and performance (Hughes et al, 1997). Since Incorporation FE research has tended to focus mainly on the effects of the first settlement and, in particular, its controlling influence on professional autonomy, management and leadership. More recently research has turned on relational aspects between the two settlements, identifying the ways in which performance management impacts on accountability, professionalism and pedagogic practice (Bathmaker, 2001(a)).

Following publication of three influential reports (Hodge, 1998; Dearing, 1996 and Kennedy, 1997), addressing radical reform in the sector, New Labour placed FE high on its skills and policy agenda (DfES, 2002). This renewed policy interest coincided with research indicating that more overt forms of confrontational management regimes, associated with the early days of incorporation, were giving way to consensual practices involving improved collaboration between practitioners and managers. According to Avis (2002) this optimism was partly explained by the departure of the first cohort of post Incorporation 'macho' management, renewed interest in teaching and learning, and, less obviously, by the 'feminisation' of management in rebuilding college management cultures (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). Notwithstanding such optimism Bathmaker (2001) argues that FE remains caught between both settlements with practitioners alternatively cast as 'devils' whose poor performance needs to be controlled and regulated, or as 'dupes' who have succumbed to the new managerialism without resistance.

"They may therefore remain dupes or devils in the eyes of the critics, for on the one hand not conforming wholeheartedly to prescribed managerial practices and, the other, not using the opportunities they have to transform teaching and learning in preferred ways." (Bathmaker, 2001, p4).

The conclusion drawn by Bathmaker and Avis (2002) is that policy makers, researchers and critics have failed to get behind such stereotypes and engage with, rather than blame practitioners, for failing to improve FE practice. According to Ball (2002) this 'discourse of derision' is not new and predates the 1992 FE/HE Act (1992), and Incorporation, finding early expression in the Education Reform Act (1988). It builds on and accommodates FE's voluntaristic and entrepreneurial legacy, allowing both settlements – market and audit – to square the quality linking local FE provision to National VET policy cycle (Hood et al, 1998). Whether in practice FE is amenable to such regulatory capture is not a clear-cut conclusion. (Cope et al, 2003). According to Gleeson (2001), despite the stringency of audit and inspection regimes now pervading FE wider evidence suggests that professionals differentiate and filter policy messages in various ways at institutional level (Gleeson and Shain, 1999). Recent research indicates that practitioners think strategically, mediate tensions in their work and often invent creative solutions out of contradictory policy-practice messages (Gale, 2003; Avis et al, 1996). In the section which follows we test the strength of such argument by considering some of the professional limitations and possibilities involved. We turn first to the processes of becoming an FE practitioner and how this frames FE practice.

Becoming an FE Practitioner

Despite recent growth and diversity in the FE sector the professionalism of FE practitioners remains largely unresearched and unrecognised in the wider education and research community. Early research in the field associates such professionalism with practitioners' former trade and occupational identities which find expression in the instrumental and pragmatic culture of FE (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980;). More recent evidence indicates, however, that this prevailing culture is being challenged as residues of old and new FE cultures sit alongside one another. According to Guile and Lucas (1999) a paradigm shift is taking place reflected in the emergence of a new 'learning professional' working across academic and vocational divisions, in a more polycontextual environment. Avis and others (2002) discern different forms of flexible specialisation arising from such changing conditions of teaching and learning, in

contrast to more traditional concerns with qualifications, structures and conditions (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2004). This change in professional status is by no means complete or unchallenged. Tension remains between the complex demands of the learning professional and the traditional forms of FE practice left unchanged and, as some argue, 'proletarianised' by the recent passage of managerial reforms (Randle and Brady, 1994; 1997). A recurring contradiction identified in the research literature is that traditional forms of professional socialisation and work practice sit uneasily with the multi-skilled nature of FE practitioner's work, in an increasingly prescribed performance environment. Few FE practitioners, for example, can trace the roots of their professionalism to an established desire to teach in FE. Entering FE is, for many, less a career choice or pathway than an opportunity at a particular moment in time. As Ruth notes

"…nobody leaves school saying, Oh I want to be a basic skills teacher. It's something you come to via a variety of routes."

The transition into FE is not a smooth one. It often coincides with lifestyle changes, career breaks, redundancy, divorce and relocation. Rachel, for example, talks of 'sliding' into FE due to a change in her personal circumstances after divorce. Following a successful career in the travel and tourism industry she pursued a second career in FE, gaining the City and Guilds 730 and Certificate in Education (FE) qualification. By her own admission her decision to become an FE teacher was initially a pragmatic one.

"It's not a vocation for me and in fact if I didn't have the children I don't think I'd be here today."

Such 'sliding' into FE is also associated with prior forms of part-time teaching which tempers the accidental nature of transition into FE teaching. John, for example, started teaching when the college needed urgent cover for a particular unit of study.

"I got to know a few people ….. and so eventually I sort of spent time sitting on the boss's doorstep, 'till he knew me well enough and I got a yearly contract, and then finally a full-time contract."

This experience of starting with a few part-time hours is typical for many tutors who find themselves socialised into FE through the 'long interview', via part-time and contract work. Gwen, for example, remembers making a critical decision about leaving a secure job to enter FE teaching,

"…….shall I take a chance because you can't get a job at any of the Colleges, well certainly not in our faculty, you can't just get a full-time job off the streets. You have to be tried and tested, and so I gave up my job, and I went part-time (teaching).

Despite the risks involved Gwen subsequently worked part-time at three different colleges before two years later being offered full-time work. In a quite different context Paul used the opportunity to teach part-time to support his dual interests.

"(I) liked it (teaching), and I suppose when I was near the end of my photography course I just thought oh yes, do a couple of evening classes and see what happens and also have a go at doing this photography business, and one was a bit more lucrative than the other. Now I do photography for me and because I teach, I've got the luxury of not having to sell anything if I don't want to."

Such 'entryism' into FE teaching is not new and, whilst mirroring national fluctuations in local labour markets, reflects FE's voluntaristic and entrepreneurial legacy (Gleeson and Mardle, 1980). Far from being challenged by modernisation traditional patterns of professional recruitment and induction, overlaid by national reforms which emphasise labour 'flexibility', reinforce casualisation and conservation practices in the sector. Whilst the nature of such flexibility can initially work to the benefit of both college and practitioner, in the long term it has proved damaging to labour relations and professional development (Hodge, 1998). If part-time and contractual work offers a flexible response to market fluctuations it also increases distinctions between core and periphery practitioners with knock on effects in terms of pay, pension and conditions of service. For the college this can perpetuate the uncertainty

around recruitment, retention and morale of staff and, for practitioners, there is the tension about whether the 'long interview' though part-time work is worth it even if a contract is eventually forthcoming.

In such circumstances teacher education and development in FE has tended to remain of secondary consideration. Despite recent government attempts to re-professionalise FE teachers through the acquisition of FENTO standards (competencies) recurring problems of recruitment, retention and casualisation have weakened the impact of such initiatives. Whilst subject knowledge and prior work experience often act to sustain new recruits entering FE many are not prepared for the fragmented working conditions that await them. John, for example, recalls feeling vulnerable in being asked to teach a unit on micro-processors which was not his area of expertise.

"I found it a painful experience really because you were so isolated. You were never quite sure whether you were doing it right or not …. You had no idea of the breadth and depth the programme was supposed to cover. So you made it up as best yourself and hoped that no one would disapprove."

From this initial experience more part-time work followed with John eventually becoming a full-time lecturer. Like John, Paul was also asked to teach an area beyond his expertise but, as a full-time member of staff and with student numbers falling, he felt vulnerable.

"I ended up running media courses because someone had to and I was one of the more flexible folk around .. and I ended up flexing myself out of what I like doing best."

Whilst there is a strong sense in which tutors and colleges collude in such flexibilisation, it also explains why FE practitioners encompass change readily in a sector where college mergers, reorganisation and redundancy is now a feature of everyday professional life. As Paul recalls, there are trade offs to be made.

"I was very, very pissed off and we were having big fights over all this: he said (Paul's line manager) when the opportunity arises you'll be back you know, and

that's what happened and I'm back and I'm running the HE side of things now which is very good. If I could do anything in the faulty it would be that"

If Paul stuck around to get the job he really wanted Gwen's experience was different. Initially she spoke about her enthusiasm for the freedom her 'one to one' working relations with students allowed, and of her car and her home '..as more office than college'.

"It's probably the most interesting job I've had because things change all the time. You can take on new things as you like and my line manager is very good at allowing me to do this."

By our second interview with her there had been changes in the funding mechanisms for NVQ which led to a college review of how work based assessors should work with students. The upshot of it was to reduce the time spent working face to face with students, to be replaced by the development of distance learning and 'e:type' assessment materials. According to Gwen:

"…..it does worry me because it would mean a lot more sitting in front of a computer and marking things on computer, and e.mailing people ……all that sort of thing, and I'm not sure whether that's the way I want to go at all."

Professional engagement with flexibility is then contingent upon a variety of experiences, sometimes punitive, enhancing or strategic. In this context 'being flexible' represents a type of risk taking that does not always have predictable outcomes. For Gwen change and flexibility may be leading toward a role she does not want whilst, in Paul's case, he has gained what he wanted….. ["I feel like I've made the sacrifice and reaped the benefits if you like".]

Such contrasting fortunes can be likened to a pair of balance scales: on the one side are the structural frustrations with the job and, on the other, the compensatory aspects of working with colleagues and students. (Gleeson and Shain, 1999). There are times when one side will weigh heavier than the other, and also times when the two sides will be in balance with one another. Rachel for example, provides an example of both the restrictive and expansive elements of this dimension. (See Fuller and Unwin 2001)

i. "I think as I get more into it (the job) I find it more and more difficult …. To think of apportioning your time between what you think you're here for and what you actually end up doing": and

ii. "The joys are of course the students that you can see you've, or feel you've made a difference with, the ones that have really come on. You know their confidence builds and so on. However you look at it you've got to have had some part in that……."

Despite her earlier denial of vocation Rachel expresses values and attitudes traditionally associated with professional commitment and engagement. The subtle ways in which agency and structure surface in practitioner narratives is, however, revealing as we go on to argue. Analysis of more than thirty plus interviews with participating practitioners in the TLC-FE project reveals, on the one hand, disenchantment with pay, inspection and administration and, on the other a strong commitment to teaching and student development. Whilst the background and interpretations of this process vary among practitioners they share much in common. Noticeable is the way in which tutors handle 'duality' both in terms of expressing frustration with the structures that affect the conditions and contexts in which they work, and optimism about working with students and colleagues which is seen to count for more. (agency)

Yet there are contradictions around this avowed commitment to students which has a legacy going back to YOP and YTS, from the early 1980s, involving the first mass recruitment of socially excluded youth into FE. It found expression, for example, among trade practitioners concerned about their status and what they termed 'Mickey Mouse' courses, which did not measure up to apprenticeship programmes de-skilled by recession. Then, (under Thatcherism) and now with FE fast becoming a vehicle of New Labour's social inclusion policy there is controversy over the way government intervention in welfare policy is restructuring the goals' of public policy among FE professionals. As Eccleston (2003) has noted, therapeutic assumptions about low self-esteem among 'learners at risk', or 'hard to reach' students with 'fragile identities', is becoming more prevalent in policy makers and professionals everyday terminology. It is a compensatory discourse which increasingly

mirrors the professional identities of practitioners and students in unforseen ways. It is to this that we now turn.

Pedagogy and Inclusion

As FE increasingly absorbs 'hard to reach' students as part of the government's wider social inclusion agenda, provision has been skewed by audit, inspection and performance management regimes which result in a number of unintended consequences (Hyland and Merrill, 2003; Huddleston and Unwin, 2002). Whilst the desire to promote individualised student learning remains a strongly expressed core value among FE practitioners there are tensions around its delivery. (Alexiadou, 2002) One such tension is in the relationship between 'biography' and 'baggage' which eschews subject expertise in favour of a craft of 'empathy' towards students (Ecclestone, 2004). A current belief in FE is that it is essential for tutors to understand the biography of disadvantaged students (their prior experience and what their problems are) so that issues can be addressed to support effective learning which, in turn, feeds into more reflexive professional practice (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2004). Thus addressing biography is another way in which FE practitioners both define their professionalism and, at the same time, feel threatened by it. As the following comment from Tessa indicates there are lines to be drawn between biography and baggage.

"So that yes, if they've got all this baggage that they really can't get through, we're going to have to try and do something about it before we can free up their mind …. You're always going to get that ….. they come with a lot of baggage and you're always going to get the ones that want to offload that…. You can't take all their bags and baggage. (But) you do have to listen to some of it sometimes …. I'm not a counsellor and you need, alright if you feel they need referring somewhere then you can do that."

The argument is taken a step further by George, a Business Studies tutor who, points out that "with the younger kids" he is now hardly a teacher, and feels more like a welfare officer. This shift, from 'teaching to welfare', arose in a number of interviews. It is seen as one of the consequences of a social inclusion policy which has involved the college in recruiting ever younger, and ever more 'marginal' and vulnerable students into a variety of vocational

programmes that are inappropriate to their needs, or beyond their reach (Ainley and Bailey, 1997). The nature of such inclusion has become codified by practitioners in terms of interpretations of what 'the old' and 'the new' FE is about: between principles of teaching one's subject to motivated students and issues of social justice and inclusion. The issue of professionalism raised here is about more than just 'biography and baggage'. It relates to uncertainties about losing a sense of professional identity and status, as practitioners move from being accredited subject specialists with expertise as 'an Economist'; through higher order teaching – 'a lecturer'; followed by what some see as a slow downgrading of their professional status as it changes to being 'a teacher' of lower status courses towards a welfare function, as tutors increasingly need to address the personal problems of new types of 'included' student. According to George the floor will be reached if and when they become untrained 'welfare officers', or even worse, 'key skills trainers'.

If such responses appear defensive they are also indicative of a reaction among FE tutors to change and uncertainty in the sector, often associated with reduction in resources, staffing and teaching hours. The 'wake' of status is one of the forces behind the tutors' contradictory dispositions towards students and is reflected in our earlier reference to 'Mickey Mouse' courses. Whether universal or not, the data here highlights the sense of marginality through which FE practitioners often define themselves. They feel caught up in a fast and changing policy-practice dynamic in which their identity and status has been 'casualised' and curtailed by a procession of market, funding-led and managerialist reform associated with innovation without change (Gleeson and Shain, 1999: Helsby, 2002).

Another such ambiguity finds expression, ironically, in students' definitions of 'good' tutors as being the ones who know their subject and can 'deliver'. The students look for the professionality of the staff in a different place from that which the staff define themselves as now occupying. The students are not, however, asking their tutors to become better at being social workers, despite the pressure among some to become redefined (Wahlberg and Gleeson, 2004). This deepens the contradictory forces around the way professionality refracts

into the learning context, creating what Bathmaker (2001(a))calls, ‘dupes’ and ‘devils’. Increasingly many tutors and students are tied to a hegemony of performance that binds them to an externally monitored cycle of recruitment, retention and certification linked to college funding, resource and remuneration (Bathmaker, 2001(b); Bloomer, 1998). In such circumstances teaching becomes a constant struggle against rather than with students. According to Avis (et al, 2002) teachers operating in such circumstances experience a sense of loss of control over the teaching and learning environment, of good students making progress, and their own sense of professionalism. Faced with these contradictory processes practitioners often use strategies to ensure that ‘biography’ can become a form of disposable ‘baggage’ rather than something that might inform more reflexive teaching and learning practices. It is also a way of accommodating students’ cultural capital which reduces rather than enhances what Dobson refers to as ‘sustainable learning’ (Dobson, 2002; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

The ever present concern among practitioners is that they will be ‘blamed’ for such apparent blinkered thinking in a world of inspection, audit and surveillance. (Hood et al, 1997) Rachel, for example, expresses the view that external inspection appears more focussed on teacher performance than student learning. Here she describes a lesson that had been observed by a senior colleague as part of a practice observation in preparation for a forthcoming inspection.

“a lesson in which I did absolutely no teaching but the outcomes were great in learning terms …. It was amusing to be told that as no teaching had tken place she (senior tutor).” Could not give me adequate feedback on the ‘lesson’ as a whole, although she could not fault the activities, the students’ commitment and dedication to the task, and the outcome was clearly that a high degree of learning had taken place. This latter was endorsed by the students who said that they had enjoyed the activity and felt they had learned a lot and it was helpful towards being able to complete a written assignment. (Journal extract*,)*

Alongside external inspection runs the never-ending tracking of students which feeds an insatiable audit trail linked to the funding of colleges. For Paul, who works in a highly flexible working environment, where adult students sign

themselves in for registration at different points in the day and week, keeping track of their attendance is difficult. He reflects here that students sometimes forget to register and that constantly registering 'hard to reach' students (though their attendance is often good) is not conducive to a high trust working relationship.

"…. It feels to me like the audit process assumes a certain mode of learning, the students turn up and sit in classrooms, which we simply don't do."

If this tension between auditing systems and the flexible nature of programmes appears innocuous it is at the root of an accountability system where discrepancies can lead to cuts in teaching hours, resources and staffing (Holloway, 1999). At the same time practitioners are conscious that in a climate of college mergers and reorganisation their jobs may be on the line if student recruitment and retention is not maintained. This is notably the case for practitioners working with so called 'hard to reach' students. John, for example, adapts a strong pastoral element in his work over and beyond that required by other colleagues in his faculty. Students share telephone contact numbers and he visits students in the workplace as well as counselling students in his own time. Celia, on the other hand, has been using text messaging with her students as a way of improving communications with the college on what she calls 'on their terms'. To date most of her tutor group use the text message system to communicate about lateness or absence, though not exclusively so as the following clips indicate:

- assessment issues and crises e.g. "*we r waitin outside staff rm 2 give our assignments but there is no1 there what shall we do";*
- goodwill messages;
- family 'policing' e.g. *"Hi it is X's brother would it be possible to come see you"* followed by a message from X *"my bro don't know ive got a fone or a bfriend he fink im in college all week & the days off ive had he don't know about them";*
- academic worries e.g. *"I am so worried about this presentation .. pl tell me u r not goin to ask questions sorry abt txtn u on weekend"*;
- EMA crises and other complaints e.g. "*(she) shouted at me in front of every1 only bcuz we were laffin in leson, I did all my wrk & she flipped at me".*

For Celia text messaging has enabled her to produce a register which is less threatening to her students: it is also filled with 'notified' absences which meets registration and audit criteria (Anderson et al, 2004). This is also a way for her to reconcile the conflict between her sense of professionalism as a tutor (knowing about and effectively helping her tutees), and the bureaucratisation of the tutor's role (its reduction to the tick boxes on the register showing 'notified' absences). Whilst Celia is aware that a number of the reasons given for lateness may be invented, this is not the issue. What matters is that the students have recognised their responsibility for reporting absence or lateness. This is a 'success' that can be chalked up. Moreover, once in touch, Celia feels that she can watch out for students who are in difficulty, and to offer help in a more meaningful way than scheduled 'progress' tutorials allow.

As Bathmaker's research indicates, (Bathmaker, 2001) the relationship between students and staff is critical to addressing the low self-esteem of the student, and addressing failure. The text messaging example reveals a critical and creative way of dealing with pragmatic and professional issues (Gale, 2003). Thus it would be a mistake to assume that FE practitioners are passive when dealing with inspection and audit cultures. What we have sought to illustrate here are the ways in which practitioners seek to resolve 'duality' in the contradictions between agency and structure experienced in the context of their work (Colley and Hodkinson, 2003). In the section which follows we return to the broader sociological implications of such analysis with reference to FE professionalism in the wider context of public accountability.

FE Professionalism in and beyond regulation

From the evidence so far the idea that there exists a 'community of professional practice' in FE is a misnomer (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The challenge is to build one around recognition of the types of high trust working practices that have informed this paper. Building professional capacity in FE requires new *theories* of professionalism which can guide pedagogy and policy since, as we have noted, the empiricism of FE practice is incapable of achieving such change alone. It also requires forms of research which challenge the prevailing

culture of technisism on which narrow regimes of inspection, audit and accountability feed. In the current volatile environment of FE the way in which research might influence FE practice is limited, as a recent TLC-FE Project Report (2004) has noted:

" …….external pressures on sites, arising from college reactions to the national policy and funding situation, have predominantly negative impacts upon learning quality. Examples include increased group sizes, serious reductions in resources and contact time, and the loss of high quality teaching staff, for example, through redundancy. In some circumstances, learning cultures and the quality of learning are only sustained because tutors put in significant amounts of extra time and effort. The current climate in the FE sector as a whole is generally hostile to research capacity building, though unintentionally so. Except for a few pockets, research is seen as a luxury that can only be afforded at times of plenty, and FE has very few of those" (Hodkinson et al, 2004: p4).

What the narratives in this study reveal so far is a disjuncture between the policy rhetoric of FE as a high skill vocational route, characterised by greater social inclusion and opportunity, and the reality as it is experienced by professionals 'on the ground'. To say that such disjuncture reflects the contradictory nature of education practice is to state the obvious. What we have sought to demonstrate is that professional knowledge is constructed, changed and sustained through the working out of tensions experienced between external criteria of performance and those 'ecologies of practice' (Stronach, 2002) that frame reality making among FE professionals. This situational and constructionist view of professional knowledge contrasts sharply with disembodied conceptions of the FE professional as the harbinger of technical skills and competencies, delivering units and responding to targets in a technicist fashion. It emphasises the importance of agency, context and creativity, including issues of culture and identity in constructing the vocational habitus of FE practitioners (Engenstrom and Young, 2001).

Such a perspective suggests that professional knowledge is not fixed but situated in recurringly unstable conditions, in a variety of localised circumstances. The creative tensions involved cannot, therefore, be reduced to either/or oppositions (dupes or devils) but rather find expression in the dual

identities which practitioners experience in the contradictions of their everyday work. As we have argued, at one level, coalition through audit fosters pathologies of defensiveness in response to performance cultures. At another it can evoke either resistance or strategic compliance where performance targets are considered unworkable or in danger of collapse (Gleeson and Husbands, 2001). Research emphasising the deprofessionalising tendencies associated with such pressures tend to charicature the way professionals react to rather than act on the ethical and existential tensions involved.

Another possibility is to understand issues of identity as a basis for rethinking how professionalism can be reworked in preferred ways. Seddon and others (2003), for example, emphasise the way that liberal market reform is changing the boundaries of professional practice, challenging occupational standards and reshaping the work place, including broader articulations of power, knowledge and community in the wider politics of civil society. At the same time it is through such 'living tensions' that multiplicity in professional roles and identities are experienced and developed in transformative ways (Zucas and Malcolm, 2002). In their study '*Management Lives'* Knights and Wilmott(1999) demonstrate how such lived experience enables practitioners to define their professionality in practice, rather than to interpret the experiences as eroding creativity and autonomy. This view contrasts with those perspectives that seek to re-professionalise or modernise FE teachers, without interrogating either the terms of their professionalism or the neo-liberal practices in which it currently resides. It also draws attention to the ways in which professionalism is constructed from *within* the cracks, crevices and contradictions of practice, rather than imposed from external sources such as government, policy makers, corporations and media. As the more disembodied elements of performance management come under scrutiny the intriguing question is raised whether marketisation has had the paradoxical effect of restoring professional power by reconstructing professionalism through resistance and contestation (see Ranson, 2003). According to Stronach (2003) such identity formation constitutes a powerful narrative ethic which allows professionals to 're-story' themselves in and against the audit culture.

If, as we have argued, one form of accountability, professional self-regulation, has been replaced by another based on neo-liberal principles, where do we look for new signs of professionalism? Neither form constitutes an adequate model of public accountability. Yet, regulative accountability has had the paradoxical effect of drawing attention to failures and contradictions associated with managerialism and audit regimes (missed targets, contestation and compliance), considered so far. The issue is, then, more complicated than simply calling for a renewal of independent professionalism or 'restorying' professionals. It also involves reference to wider forms of power, governance and accountability necessary to promote democratic professionalism in and for civic society. To paraphrase Marx, human beings make their own history but not necessarily in the manner or conditions of their own choosing (Lauder, Brown and Halsey, 2004)

As we have argued, evidence from different sector and workplace studies reveal that professionals experience contradiction between agency and structure in their work, (Shain and Gleeson, 1999). At one level this manifests itself in creative and routinised compliance, rule following or rule breaking, resulting in the fabrication of activities designed to meet targets with which professionals do not readily identify. At another, it involves mediation, contestation and redefinition among professionals negotiating or exploiting contradictions where audit cultures do little more than hold professionals and clients to account. As Ranson (2002) notes, such activity is embodied in spaces of local governance (school, hospital, health centre, government offices) which offer professionals, agencies and community groups the opportunity to work together, in *localised* interventions. For Seddon et al (2003) this brings into relief the 'bigger picture' including questions about social interests and regime change, in the analysis of day to day policy construction. It also begins to reveal, at the same time, the limitations of neo-liberalism and counter-rationalities at the level of individuals and their identities.

"Such analysis prompts questions about the nature of social partnership work and workers, their relationship with various political rationalities and political projects, and the way these activities map across the wider social structures in

terms of gender, ethnicity, class and in relation to the state." (Seddon et al, 2003. P18.)

In this context the transformative potential of professionals 'restorying themselves' is contingent on the restoration of wider forms of democratic governance and accountability which grow out of cultural capital and citizenship, which transcend economised market and consumerised concerns imposed from above (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). If part of this process involves forms of governance involving social partnerships and self-governing institutions, it is also dependent on more transparent forms of plurality, contestation and accountability at the centre of the public sphere (Hood et al, 1998). According to Marquand (2002) a priority for modern, social democracy is to both retrieve and reinvent the public domain which erect barriers against unaccountable incursions of the market. Central to this restructuring is a balancing of 'agreement making' (Nixon et al, 1997) between government, professionals and local communities concerning the objectives, strategies and forms of accountability that is part of a wider democratic conversation (Lauder et al, 2004). In other words it involves relational aspects of both agency and structure.

"Notions of agency and structure are potentially important in drawing attention to power relationships that lead to inequalities in life chances' equally explanations of how the individual relates to society and central to citizens' social and democratic understanding of their place in the world, what has been called reflexive solidarity' (Lauder, Brown and Halsey, 2004. P.19.)

Reflexive solidarity in FE is easier said than done. It involves the ability of professionals to reflect on their actions and conditions to change and modify these in the light of practice and experience, and to exercise independent judgement accordingly (Bourdieu, 1977). This is not an easy option but rather one that articulates a theory of political interest and regime change which intersects personal and public issues (Wright-Mills, 1969). It begins to reveal, as we have argued, the limitations of neo-liberalism and, more importantly, offers insight into counter-rationalities that can transform individuals and identities in the reflexive context of their work. This is not a process driven by

empirism but rather one which articulates a *theory* of professional authority grounded in the consent of civic society through which more robust forms of professionalism can expose political rhetoric to public scrutiny.

"Systems of governance acquire authority if they are perceived as legitimate, that is, if they have wider support, and when legitimate they endure over time. This emphasises the constructed nature of democratic governance." (Ranson, 2003. P475)

Conclusion

Such argument turns on ***relational*** forms of discourse which position professionalism alongside more transparent democratic forms of accountability at the centre of civic society. This offers a different view of conventional partnership agreements which accommodate professionals and citizens within externally prescribed performance agendas. If this sounds a familiar argument in support of strengthening professionalism against 'private' market interests, it is more than that. It addresses wider forms of 'duality' around which both structure and agency challenge *dualism* and, in the current context of professional practice, give voice to critique and ideas emerging from the contradictions between education policy and practice. In this context FE professionals, as experts and citizens, prowl the boundaries of public and private spaces in brokering the interface between citizen, state and consumer interests. In a multi-million pound sector, linking school F/HE and work – incorporating over 4 million students of all ages and backgrounds – FE practitioners are well placed to engage with this process. In this respect restorying professional narratives becomes inseparable from a more communicative discourse of public accountability, fashioning more authentic forms of authority and voice linked to local conditions of governance and public accountability. This in turn, Crouch (2003) argues, requires that both policy and professional agendas mutually inform one another which, in principle, allows local contexts (colleges, schools, hospitals, universities, welfare and community organisations) to mediate between central and global agendas. This we argue, brings FE professionalism in from the cold by challenging the conditions of

dualism that have constrained professional practice as either self-serving or in the service of a performance society, and move it toward a more transformative view of its role in public life.

Appendix

Acronyms

ALI	Adult Learning Inspectortate
DfES	Department for Education and Science
DTI	Department for Trade and Industry
ESRC	|Economic and Social Research Council
FE	Further Education
FE and HE Act (1992)	Further and Higher Education (Act. 1992)
FEFC	Further Education Funding Council
FENTO	Further Education National Training Organisation
LSCs	Learning and Skills Councils
LSS	Learning and Skills Sector
NVQ	National Vocational Qualification
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education
PCET	Post Compulsory Education and training
QCA	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
TLC-FE project	Transforming Learning Cultures in FE Project
TLRP	Teaching and Learning Research Programme (ESRC)
VET	Vocational Education and Training

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