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*A Guide to Instrumentalism: Initial Teacher Education in the Lifelong  
Learning Sector*

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Symposium  
*Initial Teacher Education in the English Lifelong Learning Sector: control, change and  
professional practice*

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## **Introduction**

This paper provides a critique of the competence based approach to teacher education in the Learning and Skills Sector. This critique is made at a time of consultation of proposed developments to the current standards, which are due for implementation from 2012 and which will involve only minor changes. The existing, Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) standards were introduced in September 2006 following withdrawal of the old FENTO standards (FENTO, 1999) which had been subject to criticism that they did not meet the needs of trainee teachers and did not adequately reflect the developmental nature of Initial Teacher Education (ITE). The revised standards were intended to reflect this developmental process, and to contribute raising standards and the 'professionalisation' of the sector (DfES/Standards Unit 2004); however, even before their introduction concerns were raised about over-regulation (Lucas, 2004:49).

Despite a significant level of investment in the new standards, what eventually emerged has been subject to even greater criticism than the FENTO standards (e.g. see Lucas, 2007; Finlay et al 2007; Gleeson and James, 2007 and Simmons and Thompson 2007). Key features in this criticism have been the narrow concept of learning and skills, and the lack of recognition of both the wider dimensions of professional practice and the importance of knowledge. Contextualised within this literature, this paper argues that the detailed and prescriptive competency based structure of contemporary teacher training in the FE sector, together with wider regulation such as Ofsted and LLUK endorsement requirements, is productive of teachers who are instrumental and conformist but who lack the knowledge to engage with the concerns for social justice which are fundamental to working in the FE sector. In turn, these teachers deliver an instrumental and competency based vocational curriculum which, the paper argues, is complicit with other systems and structures in education in the reproduction of labour and of social class.

The paper also draws on literature addressing issues around assessment (Ecclestone, 2010) and professionalism (e.g. Gleeson and James, 2007; Bathmaker, 2006) as well as class based critiques of the FE system which draw on work by, amongst others, Avis, (2007), Atkins (2009) and Colley (2006). The arguments in this paper are also supported by a deconstruction of the current standards. This deconstruction has been used to identify what is – and is not – supported or promoted by the standards in the context of education and wider notions of professionalism and to problematise them in the context of contemporary literature.

## **A Class Specific Sector**

The FE sector is widely regarded as a 'second chance sector' both by teachers (Bathmaker and Avis 2005:55) and by many of those who access it (for example, see work by Bathmaker, 2001:94 and by Ross and Gray 2005:103), a notion which is also written into the 2006 Professional Standards in the context of 'encouraging learners to seek initial and further learning opportunities' (LLUK 2006:14). The sector is also largely class specific and accessed mainly by young people from lower socio economic groups (Colley *et al* 2003:479; Macrae *et al* 1997:92).

In other words, those who access the sector having 'failed' at their first chance of an education are drawn from similar social and cultural backgrounds leading Stanton and Fletcher (2006) to argue that 'the intake to different types of institution – further education (FE) colleges, tertiary colleges, schools and sixth form colleges – differs significantly in terms of prior attainment, social class and ethnicity'. In addition to these issues of social class the perceived quality and value of much of the vocational training available in the FE sector has led to academic criticisms of the contemporary vocational curriculum as being not 'second chance, but second best' (Bathmaker 2001:94) and it is widely regarded as a low status, low-value educational route leading to low pay, low skill work (e.g. Bates *et al*, 1984; Ainley, 1991:103; Tomlinson, 1997:4; Helsby *et al*, 1998:74; Bathmaker, *ibid*). As I have argued elsewhere (see Atkins 2009; 2010), those people who access the sector are already lacking cultural capital, have limited agency and are victims of multiple structural injustices in terms of social class, gender, race and perceived educational achievement. They include some of the most marginalised people in our society and have little, if any awareness of the political and educational structures and power imbalances which impact so powerfully on their lives. Thus, it is a fundamental imperative of teaching in the sector to work towards a more socially just position in which FE students can engage more fully with society, exert their agency and reach a position where they are able to 'ask why their education contributes so often to the reproduction of social inequality' (Colley, 2006, p. 27).

Such a move to a more critical and socially just pedagogy in the sector is predicated on teachers having a broad understanding of the social positioning of their students and of the societal, economic and educational structures which constrain them. However, the development of such understandings and knowledge is inconsistent with the contemporary, standards led ITE programmes, which does not address any of the fundamental social and political issues in FE and which is wholly based on an acquisition model of learning. This position is exacerbated in the workplace, where teachers are immersed in a culture of CBET – with all its implications for the (re) production of class and labour – which is concerned with instrumentalism, acquisition and economics, rather than with social justice and the broader, philosophical benefits of education.

Thus, as trainees pass through the 'processes of habituation to the vocational culture through VET' (Colley 2006:17), a conformist and uncritical mindset is nurtured and re-inforced. Further, teachers in FE are largely prepared to deliver a CBET curriculum – and those joining the sector in the past decade are not likely to have experience of other types of curriculum or assessment - and to conform with the statutory and regulatory requirements imposed by quasi-governmental organisations such as OfSTED and, latterly, SVUK. Regulation by such organisations has increased exponentially over the past 15 years (Lucas, 2004), running parallel with the continuous reform of the structure of teacher education (Nasta, 2007) and the professionalisation agenda, all of which, as Lucas (2004) suggested, seemed designed to radically change the nature of teacher education for the post-compulsory sector. Part of the impact of those changes now seems likely to re-inforce, rather than ameliorate, a situation in which teachers are now being trained as an integral part of an educational structure which is complicit in class and labour (re) production, a position which is clearly in conflict with notions of social justice.

### **Analysis of 2006 Standards**

This argument is supported by an analysis of the 2006 standards. This analysis which was undertaken by applying a simple form of word frequency analysis highlights the emphasis placed on instrumentalism in the form of quality assurance and statutory requirements, and the limited value placed on knowledge and broader theoretical understandings of teaching and learning.

Analysis of Domain A *Professional Values and Practice*, (see Professional Standards, LLUK 2006:3) whilst having 13 references to learning (which is not defined) and 11 to learners, makes only 3 references to teaching but 4 to statutory requirements. An alternative analysis of the knowledge criteria shows that of 10 knowledge criteria in Domain A, only one refers to research (*AK 4.3 Ways to reflect, evaluate and use research to develop own practice, and to share good practice with others*) whilst 5 relate to statutory requirements and the quality cycle. Setting aside the imbalance between the requirement to use research and those to be familiar with QA mechanisms and Ofsted requirements, this criterion inherently places equal value on all research, and fails to acknowledge that there are conflicting views on many critical aspects of PCET, examples of which include the debates around therapeutic education, learning styles and personalised learning.

The standards also appear to be complicit with 'taken for granted' assumptions in FE which are often predicated on weak or insubstantial research and in some cases are the 'urban myths' of the sector. Indeed, I would argue that the competence based approach of the standards also fails to provide opportunities for grounding in the core subjects of

philosophy, sociology and history of education which provide a broader understanding of the current context. For example, whilst the 2006 standards make 15 references to 'equality', primarily in the context that teachers should promote equality amongst their students, there is no mention of inequalities, poverty, deprivation or social class despite the class-specific nature of the sector. Further, the competence based structure of the standards places emphasis on an acquisition model of learning in which any acknowledgement of the social processes and benefits of learning are absent. This provides a single model of learning for trainee teachers, denying them broader understandings of learning processes and theories and thus raises questions about the value and effectiveness of contemporary ITE.

In order to be able to work as informed professionals it seems inescapable that teachers should be able to synthesise contemporary debates and understandings, and to critique orthodoxies, in the context of their own practice, in order to develop broader understandings of education, knowledge and learning. In the context of the debates highlighted above, for example, this failure to acknowledge conflicting debates can lead to the implementation of questionable practice in that key teaching and learning decisions are implemented predicated on concepts and theories with little, if any, evidential basis. As Hargreaves (1996/2007) has argued, teaching is not at present a research based profession. Even if those practices are superficially benign, there is a potential loss to students of what might be achieved if teaching and learning were grounded in robust and relevant research. Further, there is the possibility that questionable practices may actually be harmful, as in Ecclestone's (2004) contention that some of the practices she associates with 'therapeutic education' engender dependency and are contrary to social justice. This argues a moral and ethical imperative for teachers to be educated to question and critique, rather than to conform, to enable them to apply and implement current and robust research findings in their practice, such as, for example, the TLRP's evidence-informed ten pedagogic principles (see James and Pollard, 2006).

Whilst research is given a low profile in the professional standards, references to reflective practice are far more extensive. The requirement to engage in reflective practice may be found in all domains, apparently reflecting a desire to model ITE on Schon's concept of the reflective practitioner (e.g. see Schon, 1987). Yet this approach, once considered radical, has itself become part of the orthodoxy of ITE. Traditionally used in most ITE programmes, it tends to be addressed in a superficial manner and is not subject to critical examination as part of the curriculum. This is despite the fact that this approach to professional development has been criticised by, amongst others, Lucas

(2007) and Ecclestone and Hayes (2009:100). Other work has explored the problematic nature of making objective assessments of, for example, the reflective journals that form part of the assessment requirement for many ITE programmes (e.g. see Tummons, 2011), and taken together, these critiques suggest that the widespread use of a reflective model of ITE, which conforms to thinking and orthodoxies which are, in some cases, decades old, is also perpetuating an uncritical mindset amongst teachers and ultimately leading to a denial of the potential for greater agency amongst professionals as well as amongst students.

The twin emphases on conformity and orthodoxy within the standards also raise a number of important questions. , How can the professional standards require ITE students to *reflect, evaluate and use research to develop own practice?* (LLUK, 2006:3) if they do not reflect major research projects such as TLRP, conform to traditional orthodoxies but do not prepare teachers to critique and question or provide them with the opportunities to develop strong and useful knowledge about the nature of education and the students they teach? Ultimately, the failure of the current ITE curriculum in this area is leading to a position where the staff force within the sector can only be unquestioning, compliant and uncritically accepting of the discourses of managerialism, fragility and blame variously used by government and institutions desperate to resolve perceived failures and problems within the system.

### **Learning, Teaching (Knowledge) and Assessment**

It is apparent from the arguments above that much of the focus of the standards is on aspects of conformity and regulation rather than on knowledge, understanding and more authentic concepts of professionalism, a situation which has led Coffield (2008:5) to argue that the standards merely make 'ritual genuflection is made to the central importance of learning'. He goes on to argue that in the absence of any official and explicit definition of learning the implicit definition within official texts 'amounts to nothing more or less than the transmission and assimilation of knowledge and skills' (Coffield, 2008:6)

However, even the narrow 'transmission and assimilation' of knowledge and skills has to be predicated on some form of understanding, yet, in the Standards, the word *knowledge* appears only four times and, like learning, is not defined. On three occasions this relates vaguely to *knowledge of own specialist area*. This broad term does not, however, specify a need for subject knowledge, or to the occupational knowledge of doing and understanding particular types of work but rather reflects Ecclestone and Hayes' concept of Teacher Training which is increasingly distanced from traditional

concepts of subject knowledge and criticality (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009:100). Since effective pedagogy engages with valued forms of knowledge (James and Pollard, 2006) such as the subject knowledge advocated by Ecclestone and Hayes, the weakening/decline of subject content in ITE has serious implications for teaching and learning within the FE sector and, by extension, for the economy.

Indeed, the move to an instrumental, CBET approach to ITE which emphasises regulation and conformity, has many parallels with the competence based education and training dominant in the wider FE sector, and is a model of pedagogy Avis (2007:161) has described as 'narrow, outcome led learning [which] is out of kilter with the needs of a knowledge economy'. ITE for the FE sector clearly reflects changes in the training provided in colleges over the past 30 years as process forms of curricula have transmogrified into product driven lists of 'competencies'. There are two key aspects to these changes. The first is the conflation of 'skills' with 'education' and the second an ongoing decline in the quality of skills training in the sector. The two are not unrelated. There has been a dilution of strong occupational knowledge and skills and the programmes which offered this have been replaced with 'broad vocational' programmes which emphasise the development of literacy, numeracy, personal and social skills through vocationally orientated programmes (Ecclestone, 2010:29). These vocationally orientated programmes, rather than leading to high pay, high skill work, prepare young people for the low pay, low skill economy in a form of class and labour (re) production (Atkins, 2009; 2010), driven by economic, rather than educational, imperatives. These programmes have strong similarities to ITE programmes in the sector which offer superficial, rather than valued knowledge, and emphasise the 'minimum core' skills of literacy and numeracy (rather than English and mathematics) suggesting that FE teachers, rather than being prepared to support a high pay, high skills economy, are in fact being prepared to form part of the educational structures which are complicit in class and labour (re) –production, possibly part of a rational strategy linked to low prices, monopolisation and low wages. As Coffield (1999:490) eloquently states 'Socrates taught me that knowledge would set me free; Peter Mandelson tells me that its modern function is to make employers rich.' In a sector whose role is to prepare young people and those seeking a second chance, for the 'skilled' employment which is regarded by government as 'an economic imperative' (Department for Education and Skills, 2005a, p. 17), this suggests that it is also the role of FE teachers to make employers rich. In addition, the conflation of skills with education, in a context where skills training is in decline, has led to a position in which intending teachers are only prepared to deliver weaker forms of knowledge, and are provided with the opportunity to develop only the most superficial – and in some cases questionable – understandings of



education. Thus, the logical conclusion of this is that understandings of education will be weakened and lost amongst teachers in the sector.

Further, the outcomes based assessment model is one which has been repeatedly criticised for approaching two decades. Writing in 1996, Esland argued that the behaviourist, outcome based notion of competence forms part of a 'sterile and dehumanised [assessment] system [which] has led to increased commodification of education and training' (Esland, 1996:68). With remarkable prescience, he also noted that it was increasingly seen as an appropriate model for the education and training of professionals, particularly teachers, whilst Bloomer (1997:193/194) argued in favour of a move away from current outcomes or product based modes of assessment in favour of more process based assessment. Similar criticisms were made in Ecclestone's (1997) critique of NVQs which argued that their criterion referenced, outcome based approach, had serious implications for a 'critical, broad based education'. A decade later the competency based model which arose from *Equipping our Teachers* contained 253 separate assessment criteria (see SVUK 2007), creating a system directly comparable with NVQ assessment and which was even more detailed and prescriptive than the assessment systems criticised by Esland (1996) and earlier by Hyland (1995:54) who argued that 'the mechanical, atomistic and behaviourist nature of CBET [Competency Based Education and Training] is at odds with *the work of professionals and the requirements of professional development*' (my emphasis).

Despite the intent behind the professionalisation agenda it may be argued that the required coverage of assessment criteria within the revised ITE qualifications have left little space or time for trainee teachers to engage with wider concerns about education. To put it bluntly, 'coverage' of such prescriptive criteria is so time consuming that meeting the assessment requirements (or training for the test) becomes the focus of an increasingly narrow and regulated curriculum.

This approach is inconsistent with the proposals made by Hayward et al (2006:244) as part of the Nuffield Review of 14-19 Education. They identify a need to reconcile assessment for learning with assessment for accountability and argue for a complete overhaul of the existing assessment system to encompass more assessment for learning rather than assessment for accountability, more appropriate assessment for practical and experiential learning, and diversity of standards for different kinds of learning. It is difficult to see how teachers in the sector could be part of such a move, when they have only been exposed to CBET assessment processes.

## **Professionalism**

The notion of professionalism in the FE sector is a dichotomous one in which opposing concepts of professionalism are in tension with one another. The 'Professional Standards' (LLUK, 2006) were developed in response to the 2003 Ofsted report which identified failings in teacher education and in the FENTO (1999) standards (Ofsted, 2003; 2006). This led to calls for 'professionalisation' of the sector and resulted in the publication of *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future* (DfES 2006) an initiative which subsequently gave birth to the standards. The standards lay considerable emphasis on professionalism in a variety of forms, but fundamentally form a list of behavioural characteristics and knowledge specifications which, when met, fulfil the requirements for a 'professional' FE teacher. The production of such a set of standards draws on the simplistic analysis that systemic issues within the sector, such as those identified by Ofsted, can be addressed by requiring teachers to meet lists of behaviourist competences. In doing so, it fails to acknowledge the complexities of professional identity amongst lecturers or of the 'struggle to make sense of the sector and of their role within it' experienced by those making the transition from their previous profession to that of a professional educator' (Spencelay, 2007:95).

This transition also involves the complex interplay between and amongst identities, as the teacher moves from the identity associated with, for example, plumbing, to that of teacher. As well as these issues of changing and developing identities, increasing regulation and pressure to conform have led to arguments that, particularly since incorporation, teachers in the FE sector have been increasingly de-professionalised within a managerialist and finance driven sector, (e.g. see Avis, 2007; Bathmaker, 2006; Randle and Brady 1997a; 1997b) something which has been associated with increasing intensification of their work (usually in terms of administration) parallel with diminished control of that work (Esland 1996:33; Ainley and Bailey 1997:62). In his analysis of these arguments Avis (2007) identified a number of familiar themes impacting on the role of the professional in FE including loss of control, intensification of labour, increased administration, perceived marginalisation of teaching and stress on measurable performance indicators. These themes are broadly similar to those described earlier by Pollitt (1990) as being illustrative of the 'new managerialism'.

Avis went on to contest a perception that FE teachers are a 'homogenised' group, drawing on Leathwood's (2005) work to illustrate the constitutive nature of class, gender and ethnicity in lecturers' identity and arguing that it is not merely an adjunct of vocational cultures. He concluded that the FE sector is seeing an 'increasing proletarianization, de-skilling and intensification of labour' amongst its teaching staff, echoing Randle and Brady's (1997a:134) contention that 'some analysts (Wilson, 1991; Trow, 1993), have developed a 'proletarianisation', 'de-skilling' or 'de-professionalisation'

thesis to describe the undermining of the professional paradigm by the new managerialism’.

The issues of an increasingly market driven sector, with ever more regulation and audit does, as Avis argued, undermine traditional, critical and democratic notions of professionalism. In their place, different, conformist and corporate models of professionalism have arisen, forming part of the ‘unprecedented control of the detailed structure and content of training courses’ established within a discourse of the ‘professionalisation’ of teaching in the sector (Simmons and Thompson, 2007:171).

The tensions between the corporate and democratic paradigms of professionalism have been described as a form of ‘dualism’ by Gleeson and Knights (2006: 277ff) who argue that there are polarised sociological views of practitioners who are seen as either de-professionalised ‘victims’ oppressed by structures of control, or as ‘strategic operators, seeking to contest the spaces and contradictions of market, managerial and audit cultures’. Gleeson and Knights go on to challenge ‘modernising agendas’ which fail to explore changing conditions of work or the neo-liberal concerns framing practice whilst seeking to re-professionalise’ and/or empower practitioners and explore how the mediation of this tension is reflected in ‘professional practices that facilitate political transformations that might advance forms of social, as well as audit, accountability’ (p.278). This analysis acknowledges both the agency of teachers and the structures within which they operate; the professional standards however, imply a model of professionalism in which the teacher seeks to engage with and conform to ‘market, managerial and audit cultures’. This is particularly evident in the standards for Domain A *Professional values and practice*, analysis of which demonstrates that the terms statutory requirements, quality and evaluation have much greater weight/significance than principles, which are surely inextricably linked to professional values. This corporate model of professionalism is at odds with notions of critical and authentic professionalism but is consistent with Gleeson and James’ contention that new forms of managerialism in the public sector – including FE - have led to a position where practitioners have become regarded as licensed deliverers of nationally produced materials, targets and provision rather than as trusted public professionals (Gleeson and James, 2007:452, citing Coffield et al 2005).

An evolving clash of cultures, or values, between corporate and critical constructs of the term ‘professional’ were first noted by Randle and Brady (1997a) over a decade ago, and more recently by Bathmaker (2006) and Evetts (2005) , arguments which also reflect Gleeson and Knight’s notion of dualism. Bathmaker goes on to argue that corporate professionalism, whilst using a discourse of learner centredness, widening participation and achievement, and appearing to be in concert with an ethics of care and

fairness amongst lecturers nevertheless puts pressure on them to 'perform and conform'. In contrast, she suggests that critical professionalism is rooted in concerns for social justice and equity, and encompasses democratic professionalism (citing Sachs, 2001) and authentic professionalism (citing Newman and Associates 1996).

Concerns about the de-professionalisation of the sector have led to calls for a 'more dynamic notion of professional participation' (Colley et al, 2007: 173); however, it is apparent that that this is unlikely to happen in the foreseeable future or at least whilst the government has such an 'unprecedented degree of control over FE training curricula' via increasing centralisation and requirements such as meeting the minimum core and endorsement of initial teaching qualifications, compliance, rather than criticality has become the main focus of teacher education (Simmons and Thompson, 2007: 175)

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, I would argue that the prescriptive and competence based ITE is failing to produce teachers who are able to engage with concerns around social justice because the theories and concepts around this, which might be covered in a broader, more critical curriculum, are absent from current ITE requirements. Instead, contemporary ITE is producing teachers whose only understanding of learning and teaching is predicated on a narrow and instrumental acquisition model of learning, in which valuable knowledge is all but absent but in which they are well prepared to meet the demands of regulatory organisations such as Ofsted.

Such a position does teachers, and more particularly the students they teach, who are amongst the most disadvantaged and socially excluded in the education sector, a great disservice. Teachers, like the young people on low value vocational programmes they teach, are being sold a deception (Atkins, 2010), not in this case of a post-fordist dream of high pay, high skill work but one of professionalism, knowledge and parity with the compulsory sector. Instead, they are offered a corporate model of professionalism associated with conforming to audit and managerialist cultures rather than a more critical professionalism rooted in concerns for equity and social justice, a superficial knowledge based on traditional orthodoxy rather than contemporary research leading to career opportunities and potential earnings far less than those their colleagues in primary, secondary and HE are able to command. And this is despite the 'curious positioning' (Bailey and Robson 2002) of the FE teacher whose role overlaps with those of teachers in both the compulsory system and in Higher Education.

We must develop a system which is more able to engage effectively with concerns around social justice, and with concepts such as knowledge and pedagogy. This would

involve some fundamental changes to current models of ITE. There is a need to move away from current standards driven, CBET approaches which instrumentalise and commodify learning, and begin to debate what a 'good' ITE programme – unfettered by all this – might look like. I suggest that it would involve a broad liberal curriculum covering those subjects fundamental to understanding the nature of education such as the philosophy, sociology and history of education. We must also prepare teachers to critique, rather than genuflect to orthodoxy. I am not claiming here that all the concepts and debates highlighted in this paper (such as learning styles, emotional intelligence and personalisation) are fundamentally wrong (although I do believe that many are predicated on a weak evidential base). What I do believe is that teachers should be able to look at such concepts and debates and ask 'where did this come from?' 'what was the research?' 'how robust is that research?' 'what is contemporary thinking in this area?' 'Is contemporary thinking grounded in research or does it originate, for example, in policy initiatives?' and once they have drawn conclusions and made judgements based on those conclusions, they can apply thinking to their own practice in an informed manner, ultimately engaging more effectively with the students they teach. In terms of assessment, a new approach is also called for which does not rely exclusively on criterion referencing or assume that meeting 'competencies' necessarily engenders competence. Different, more critical forms of pedagogy and assessment would be productive of more critical, politicised professionals who are able to critique the system, promote change from within and support their students in the development of cultural capital and to exert their agency, rather than being complicit in ongoing class reproduction. In comparison, the competency based approach, emphasising achievement of small incremental hoops and by virtual elimination of the possibility of failure, generates an ethos of working to the next competency and thus creates a mindset from which critical thought is absent. Ultimately, the standards driven model of pedagogy has profound and concerning implications for the future of FE as a whole. From practical, moral and philosophical perspectives, this cannot be ignored.

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