

Managing Masculinities: Heads of Construction in Further Education

Damien Page¹

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At first glance, the building site could not be more different to a Further Education college. Construction is 'tough' work, 'real' work, a hyper-masculine environment that foregrounds physical strength, risk-taking and crude, often discriminatory humour. Further Education, on the other hand, is often positioned as a caring environment, a context of emotional labour (Leach, 2011), inclusivity and diversity (Williams, 2008). Yet for all the points of incongruence, congruence may also exist, especially in terms of organisational masculinities (Collinson and Hearn, 2001), embedded as much within the management practices of FE as the physicality of the building site. Against this background, this paper presents the findings from research involving Heads of Construction (HoCs) within FE as they manage the transition and performance of construction lecturers. The theoretical framework draws on studies of gender identity and masculinities within various industries as well as studies of career transitions in both the private sector and education. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews with 14 HoCs that focused on the backgrounds of the participants, their own transition and their experiences of managing often large and complex schools.

The findings highlight the issues of 'cultural transfer' as new lecturers struggle to adapt to the teaching role and leave behind the educationally incongruous norms of the building site such as sexism and homophobia. However, while some characteristics of blue-collar masculinity are left behind, others are desirable within colleges such as competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, central to institutional survival in the contemporary educational marketplace, especially in times of austerity. Heads of Construction are therefore charged with managing this re-articulation of masculinity for the benefit of the school, the college and their learners: the competitiveness of their teams was exploited to reach organisational targets; entrepreneurialism was encouraged to exploit links with industry to create new income streams. As such, the paper highlights the centrality of middle managers to the successful transition of vocational lecturers from industry to education as well as their influence upon the formation of the teacher-identity within a reconstructed community of practice.

Introduction

Further education and the construction site, in many ways, could not be more different. The building site is a place of 'real work', dirty, tough, rough and dominated by men, a place where 'physical labour, dirt, discomfort and even danger are believed to be the necessary concomitants of true manhood' (Ness, 2011, p8). In construction, workers exist within – and reproduce – discourse that positions them as animalistic (Paap, 2006), that legitimates politically incorrect behaviours while simultaneously perpetuating the expectation that real men should be able to withstand demanding and dangerous labour. Solidarity is maintained through 'humour and language in the workplace, distrust of abstraction or of theory, and

¹ School of Education, University of Greenwich, Avery Hill Campus, Eltham, London SE9 2PQ, d.page@gre.ac.uk; Twitter: @damien_page

devaluing or denigrating the work of women, minorities, and nonmanual workers, such as managers and professionals' (Saucedo and Morales, 2010, pp637-638). Defensive of the masculine preserve, construction workers engage in 'border-work' (Denissen, 2010, p1055) that maintains gender, ethnic and sexual boundaries: women, non-whites and gays are rarely welcome. How different, then, the world of further education, a place where the majority of the workforce is female. While construction is defined as tough, dirty and physically arduous, teaching is positioned as a caring profession, a vocation of emotional labour (Avis and Bathmaker, 2004; Salisbury et al., 2006). Here, rather than physical toughness, heterosexuality and exclusion, the discourse concerns diversity (Leach, 2011; Lumby, 2009), equality and inclusion (Doughty and Allen, 2008; Williams, 2008), essential elements of the commitment to students at the heart of the professionalism of the teaching role (Robson and Bailey, 2009; Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009).

However, for all the differences between them, the building site and FE may also share points of convergence. While the majority of teachers may be female in FE, management cultures and practices are argued to be highly masculine (Mather. Worrall and Mather, 2012; Page, 2010): aggression, competitiveness, entrepreneurialism and target-orientation are seen as inherent in managerial responses to the marketisation of the sector, values that are also highly prized in construction (Saucedo and Morales, 2001). These privileged organisational masculinities (Collinson and Hearne, 2001) also extend to the ability to cope with one's work – while the ability to cope with the physical demands of their work is often a point of pride for construction workers, the ability to cope with emotional labour is prioritised among FE staff (Page, 2013; Orr, 2012).

Given the stark differences between the two cultures, the transition from construction to FE is an important focus for managers within colleges, especially the Heads of Construction (HoCs) who are required to manage the process. With a need to recruit lecturers who possess contemporary industrial skills, the management of the transition from vocational professional to vocational teacher is an important, yet neglected, area of focus. In higher education contexts, transitions into education are often impelled by the motivator of passing on professional knowledge (Smith and Boyd, 2012; Grier and Johnston, 2011) but hampered by the anxiety of establishing academic credibility (Blenkinsopp and Stalker, 2004), alienation and emotional and subjective struggle (Gourlay, 2011). In FE, studies of transitions have highlighted its 'brokenness' (Avis and Bathmaker, 2006) with many new teachers working part time at first. Here, transition was a process of continuity and change – attachment and identification to previous industrial identities were mediated by the new environment. Yet transition is not only a matter of professional identity, cultural transition is equally as important. Previous studies of men moving to sectors that were perceived to be 'feminised' highlighted the challenge to traditional notions of masculinity experienced by men (Nixon, 2009; Pullen and Simpson, 2009).

The aim of this research was therefore to investigate the role of HoCs in managing the transition and integration of construction workers from the building site into the classroom. In such a pivotal position, Heads of Construction are responsible for managing the entire transition process from recruitment to induction to a full teaching role. Perhaps more importantly, they are also responsible for the management of the cultural transition from the hypermasculinity of the building site to the caring environment of the FE classroom/workshop, facilitating the reconstruction of identity by their staff. As such, Heads of Construction offer a valuable perspective on the issues of moving from one world to another and the strategies for ensuring a successful transition.

Methodology

The aim of this research was to gain the emic perspective of heads of construction (HoCs), ‘the insider’s view of a particular group or community’ (Savage, 2006, pp384-5), and so adopted an interpretivist approach. Purposive sampling was used to identify colleges that provided a range of construction courses and which were also distributed geographically. The HoCs were contacted directly after access was granted by the college principals and informed consent was gained. In total, 14 HoCs were recruited. Although this represents a small sample, data saturation (Guest, Bunce and Johnson, 2006) occurred at an early stage and so it was not considered necessary to recruit additional participants. All of the participants were males aged from 37 to 58 with an average age of 48. The length of role incumbency varied from the newest who had been HoC for just three months to the longest serving at 12 years. The size of the schools similarly varied with staff numbers ranging from 20 to 100 including a mixture of first tier managers, lecturers, assessors and technicians. All of the schools included brickwork, carpentry, painting and decorating, plumbing and electrical; the larger schools also included associated trades such as plastering and gas engineering. Data were collected via two semi-structured interviews with each participant of between 45 and 90 minutes – two HoCs that were within relatively local proximity were interviewed face to face, the rest were via telephone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The analysis of the transcripts began with open coding (Corbin and Strauss, 1998) to identify the initial categories and themes before selective coding occurred (Moghaddam, 2008).

Transition

On a Friday they’re putting a roof up and on a Monday they are 22 hours a week teaching with a young person disclosing to them that their father beats them up or whatever...To get someone from a construction background with that empathy is very very difficult and I’m not sure FE has a strategy to move people from a trade background to a teacher.

Mark

The recruitment of high quality construction teachers was a major concern for HoCs. Before the recession, there was a severe shortage of applicants in all of the trade areas. In the housing boom bricklayers could earn £1000 per week and the earning potential in other trades such as plumbing and electrical engineering was even greater; becoming a teacher therefore involved a huge pay cut. However, construction had been hard hit by the economic crisis and there were now a large number of tradespeople who were seeking alternative work. Teaching seemed to be a preferred route:

Lee: If you’d have asked me four years ago I’d have said [recruitment was] very difficult. Obviously with the state of the construction industry now everybody suddenly wants to be a teacher but just because the numbers are there, doesn’t mean they have the real desire that’ll see them through the job. It’s just the fact that there’s no work in the industry.

Although the number of applicants had increased, the calibre was apparently lower; HoCs suggested that few had the skills and temperament to work with young people. The result of these difficulties meant that HoCs were often faced with a dilemma: they could not recruit at all which meant cancelling an area of provision with the inevitable reduction of student numbers, an option they all ruled out given the precariousness of the sector; they could try to

cover classes with existing members of staff which meant risking the good-will of lecturers they were desperate to retain; alternatively they could take a chance on an applicant they had doubts about. The final option was often, reluctantly, chosen.

Once HoCs had recruited staff, the next problem they faced was managing the transition from the hypermasculine world of the building site to the caring and emotional labour-intensive world of FE. Coming from a dirty, tough and physically demanding context of construction, it would perhaps be anticipated that lecturers would engage in cultural transfer, bringing the norms of the building site to the college. Yet this was only evident in a minority of cases. When it did occur, it was challenged swiftly and directly:

Rob: Parking the building site mentality is an issue and I have to pull people up on a regular basis when I do observations for something that is slightly inappropriate. A lot of the equality and diversity subjects are seen as fluffy, as not important, seen as a bit namby pamby.... but they have to toe the line whether they agree with it or not.

However, while the issues of cultural transfer were reported to be manageable, the main difficulties new construction lecturers faced were in terms of adjusting to the administrative, pedagogical and pastoral demands of the teaching role. Few were prepared for the reality of teachers' work, especially the extent of bureaucracy, systems and administration, traditionally seen as 'women's work' (Lupton, 2000). The difficulties of adapting were further compounded for those staff without teaching qualifications as they were required to complete in-service teacher training. Many new lecturers, especially those from the 'tool trades', experienced difficulty with the academic demands of the course:

Pete: They struggle with the academic writing side of things. They have all struggled with their Cert. Ed. [teacher training qualification] in terms of the writing for that because they've never had to do it and writing a lesson plan or a scheme of work – it's a completely new language for them.

Tutoring was another aspect of the teaching role that proved challenging but this was by no means common to all colleges. For some HoCs, tutoring was anathema to construction lecturers (often including themselves) and was rooted, somewhat stereotypically, in the identity of tradespeople and in the masculinities of the building site:

Chris: I have many issues with [tutoring] – we're not cuddly types of people normally, we haven't got a listening ear, we don't understand personal problems [laughs] so I think we need somebody who can relate to students and go into their backgrounds to understand why they're twenty minutes late every morning rather than just give them the proverbial bollicking that some of them get.

In these cases, tutoring responsibilities were given to non-tradespeople who often happened to be female tutoring specialists from other parts of the college. This practice was reported to be highly successful – students appreciated being able to receive support from a tutor that was independent of the subject team and, as specialists, these tutors were able to fulfil the procedural requirements of the role effectively: individual learning plans, target setting and monitoring reports were all completed to the satisfaction of the HoC.

Desirable organisational masculinities

Competitiveness

While the transition of construction workers to the classroom involved leaving behind incongruous behaviours, certain characteristics of masculinity were highly desirable. Firstly there was competitiveness which found expression most clearly within notions of hierarchy, the essence of hegemonic masculinity: men above women; white men above non-white men; heterosexual men above gay men; each of which find expression on the building site. In the schools of construction however, with these measures of hierarchy incongruous, hierarchy was expressed in terms of the level of skill, knowledge and heritage embedded within each trade: engineering trades were generally seen at the top, painting and decorating at the bottom:

Pete: Now they joke about it – people having a craft, a carpenter with a craft, equally an engineer with a craft as opposed to a tradesman like a bricklayer so they do joke about it – ‘bricklaying? Well that’s just wet Lego. And plumbers, well they’re just putting bits together’.

Those further down the hierarchy – such as bricklayers – did not, however, willingly accept the dominance of the engineering staff. While they could usually not compete in terms of qualifications or the academic level of their students, they responded by emphasising the historical nature of their trades – bricklaying and carpentry were called (by bricklayers and carpenters) ‘biblical trades’ to emphasise the heritage of their craft in relation to the relative novelty of mechanical engineering. In addition, the biblical trade lecturers would place themselves about painting and decorating lecturers who were commonly seen to be at the very bottom of the hierarchy:

Lee: There’s still the site banter about ‘if you can piss, you can paint’.

All of the HoCs suggested that the notion of trade hierarchy proceeded directly from the building site and was little more than banter, a vehicle for the humour that was seen as an important part of the school and an important part of masculinity in general (Collinson, 1992; Evans, 2002). However, while apparently harmless, humour here acts as the vehicle for negotiating dominance within the masculine hierarchy. In construction, trade skills and knowledge were essential components of masculinity and so using these components to establish hierarchical subordination was a real exertion of hegemonic masculinity. The fact that it was expressed through humour and ‘piss-taking’ means it was situated within the socially and institutionally acceptable.

There were also more overt means of competitiveness apparent in the schools. Iacune’s (2005) notion of ‘one-upmanship’ on the building site had been transposed to colleges but instead of being founded on feats of strength and endurance, it existed within a performative culture: targets, pass rates, retention percentages, inspection grades:

Sam: Yeah [laughs] and not only competitive with each other in one area but also the different areas are very competitive about overall success rates and which areas are performing the best. Which is good [laughs].

Kevin: They’re quite territorial. Each tutor will have between 30 and 50 learners in their tutor groups and they become – they’re quite competitive over which group is doing the best, they are. It is good, it is good.

The measurement of performance was therefore not only accepted by construction lecturers, it was used as a means of competitive hierarchy between cognate departments.

Competitiveness was therefore not merely a hangover from the shared industrial heritage, it was functional and congruent with the performative drive of the contemporary college. As such, HoCs encouraged competition by a variety of means: at one end of the continuum Patrick would subtly remind underperforming departments about the success of their colleagues; at the other end, it was far more overt:

Jeff: It's something [competition] that I want to push next year. The statistics from our meetings I keep on our tracking sheet and next year I think the first column on it is going to be course tutor's name and I'm going to publish it on the staff notice board every month so they can see who's meeting targets and who isn't to try and encourage those who are underperforming to do something about it. Try and use that competitive nature to our advantage.

Public competition was also a feature in other schools: Pete kept a series of large tracking sheets on his office that pinpointed retention figures on a weekly basis and also pass rates throughout the year. In other cases, however, HoCs encouraged competition through ambivalence. While Fred didn't actively encourage competition, he didn't dissuade it either:

It's got to be one of the motivating factors in there. They don't want to be the bottom of the pile so to speak, they want to be up there so I think that's great cos the guy next to him, he wants to be up there as well so they're pushing against an open door between them. I wouldn't dissuade that.

Entrepreneurialism

According to Kerfoot and Whitehead (1998), incorporation resulted in a cultural shift in FE from 'benign liberal paternalism' to a work culture that emphasised entrepreneurialism, one of the principal power-related organisational masculinities of Collinson and Hearn's (2001) typology. Naturalised as essentially male (Mulholland, 1996), the discourses of entrepreneurialism celebrate business acumen, risk-taking, drive and vision embodied in the archetype of the 'self-made man'. The norm of the construction culture at all levels (Saucedo and Morales, 2010), the participants in this research were keenly aware of the importance of entrepreneurialism. Many of the HoCs and their lecturers had been self-employed or run their own small and medium-sized businesses and so entrepreneurship was second nature. As a result, the data suggested that construction lecturers were more aware of the business-nature of FE colleges and the necessities of organisational survival:

Sam: In our area they're all very aware of the resources they have, how much the budget is, what they spend the money on, making it work and actually producing products rather than just making stuff to throw away so yeah, with their background, they're in the right position to move forward to make it more business-like.

For construction lecturers, learning and financial imperatives were not in opposition – after all, both existed in harmony on the building site: highly entrepreneurial activity would sit alongside the training of apprentices as a matter of course. However, this culture meant that

some lecturers wanted their colleges to be more business-like. This was especially apparent among the younger lecturers who tended to have more recent experience of the construction industry in recession and so brought with them experience of greater drives for efficiencies and proactive entrepreneurialism. Instead, they experienced the frustrations of needless complexity (Olsen, Reger and Singer, 2010) in everything from student disciplinary processes to getting a new pen.

Another essential part of construction entrepreneurialism was the identification and exploitation of new sources of funding. With a decline in centralised funding in FE since the beginning of the globalised economic crisis, construction managers in particular were keen to create funding streams from industry rather than from government. At play here was the desire to be proactive, self-sustaining, to 'earn your keep', essential traits of entrepreneurial masculinity. While the HoCs had worked in FE for a significant length of time, they all maintained strong links with their former industry and maintained their contacts. Partly this was a desire to sustain their identification with their trade, an important part of the dual professionalism (Peel, 2005) of vocational staff in FE. Partly it could be seen as a means of adjusting to what could be perceived as a less masculine sector – several managers still saw their previous work as 'real' work as opposed to their role as an education manager:

Pete: If I'm honest I still relate to my time in industry as a real job. Probably devalues what I do now but I used to say 'well, I've had a real job in engineering'.

However, the maintenance of links with industry was more often seen as an entrepreneurial strategy: the more links they had, the more potential customers they had to sell to: apprenticeship places and bespoke training packages were literally products for HoCs and the key to the success of their schools

These practices were not confined to HoCs; the majority of managers reported that construction lecturers were also entrepreneurial:

Chris: Some staff are extremely proactive and one of them has set up a meeting this week with a massive construction firm to try and develop links. We're quite big into apprenticeships so we've got good links with employers we're now working closely with and trying to develop alternative income streams so yes, they are proactive that way.

While entrepreneurialism appeared to be normalised within their schools, two HoCs were going even further: Fred had included finding new business in the job description of his work-based assessors; Mark provided training on 'selling' provision for his lecturer.

The rearticulation of industrial culture

Given the vast differences between the building site and the FE college, it could be imagined that the transition would be difficult. One day the prospective lecturer is engaged in a context of traditional masculinity that emphasises toughness, dirt and physicality, the next they are in a FE college, a place of inclusion, diversity and emotional labour. On the building site, construction workers enjoy considerable autonomy as they exercise their expertise; in college they enter a culture of managerialism and bureaucracy while they once again take on the role of apprentice, only this time as a teacher. However, this study has suggested that the transition from construction to FE is not necessarily as problematic as the differences

between the sectors may at first suggest. While schools of construction are within colleges – places of inclusion, diversity and emotional labour – they are still staffed by ex-construction workers that provide a very different sub-culture than that found within a school of hair and beauty for example. The schools of construction in this research were also, significantly, male-dominated with very few female trade lecturers. Where women were employed, it was more often in tutoring and pastoral roles.

Not only did they bring with them the skills, knowledge and industrial currency of the construction industry, they also brought those characteristics of masculinity that are highly desirable, especially competitiveness and entrepreneurialism. In a sector demonised by the strategies of performativity (Simmons and Thompson, 2008; Avis, 2009), ex-construction workers possess the competitiveness to enact these practices as measures of masculinity, hierarchical jostling within league tables of individual performance and trade reputation. While performativity and managerialism may engender resistance in some FE employees (Page, 2010), in this study construction lecturers were reported to find congruence with their masculine heritage. Yet the potential harmony of these multiple masculinities should not be overstated. Instead, the masculinity of construction lecturers should be seen as a rearticulation, a distillation of those characteristics such as competitiveness and entrepreneurialism that are congruent within FE yet retain the cultural and industrial heritage of construction. The point is that those masculinities that are seen as desirable by FE were formed in a ‘real’ capitalist context; although FE exists within a context of competition and entrepreneurialism, colleges are still not yet run for profit or accountable to shareholders. Furthermore, the role of the HoCs in this process of rearticulation of masculinity, the shape of the competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, should not be underestimated. From the public displays of retention figures to encouragement by ambivalence, HoCs stoked the competitiveness of their teams as a result of their own competition against Heads of Schools in other subject areas. Yet this competitiveness was not purely for the sake of hierarchical dominance alone as it might be in the construction industry – instead, competitiveness was tempered by altruism that measured success not only in terms of statistics but in terms of learner success as well. High pass rates meant students had succeeded in terms of qualifications and preparation for the workplace and, given their continued identification with their former industry, this was of paramount importance – HoCs felt they had a duty to both students and construction; it is this, perhaps, that is the prime influence on the rearticulation of construction masculinity.

Here then, the transition of construction lecturers can, to an extent, be seen within Avis and Bethmaker’s (2006) notion of continuity and change: continuity is provided by the replication of a construction community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) within a college environment. However, while Avis and Bathmaker argue that the change involved in transition is ‘mediated by and not in contradiction with earlier orientations and forms of identity’ (Avis and Bathmaker, 2006, p183), in construction at least this conception is limited: the transition from the building site to the college *does* involve contradictions with prior identity. For example, elements of the construction identity such as swearing, aggression, sexism and risk-taking are all identified as routine within the community of practice on the building site yet are completely unacceptable within colleges and were swiftly challenged by HoCs. As such, the transition of construction workers does involve some elements of contradictory change. Therefore, individual level transitions involving the reconstruction of identity must be seen as a matter of necessity to enter a reconstructed community of practice that provides continuity from the building site in terms of those characteristics that are congruent with FE such as competitiveness and hard work, while

simultaneously rejecting those characteristics that are incompatible. What is compatible and incompatible is, to a large extent, determined by the HoCs; as the middle managers responsible for construction provision, HoCs are responsible for the boundaries of the community of practice regulating both the admission of new members and the behaviour of those within.

Conclusion

There can be few more different workplaces than the building site and the classroom yet, with construction provision a key curriculum offer in FE, transitions will be continuous. The success of the transition depends on the ability of the new teacher to leave behind those aspects of hegemonic masculinity that have no place in the contemporary college and recreate their identity in response to the first principles of inclusion and diversity and the replacement of physical labour with emotional labour. Key to successful transitions are Heads of Construction, middle managers who draw on their own experiences of industry and transition to act as gatekeepers, defining which elements of hegemonic masculinity needs to be left on the building site and which are desirable. Schools of construction, therefore, are rearticulated construction communities: still largely staffed by men, masculinity is enacted within the congruent in terms of competitiveness and entrepreneurialism, characteristics ideally suited to the performativity of the FE sector.

There is a remaining issue however: the extent to which the potential congruence of these multiple masculinities further perpetuates the hegemony that is at the heart of masculinities. After all, while certain characteristics of masculinity may be desirable in colleges, this desirability is perhaps further evidence of the continuing masculinity of colleges en masse. If competitiveness and entrepreneurialism are seen as masculine and prized, what is the impact upon women, gay or 'academic' male staff? The extent to which competitiveness and entrepreneurialism act as means of domination are clear conceptually but this was less evident in the accounts of the HoCs. It is possible that the privileging of certain masculinities by construction staff legitimates the masculine managerialism arguably so dominant in the sector and, through the congruence of multiple masculinities, precludes other forms of organisation and the entry of women and other marginalised groups to senior management positions within colleges.

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