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Education

2006

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VOCATIONAL EDUCATION & TRAINING AND THE THERAPEUTIC TURN

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Abstract

The concept of 'therapeutic education' (Hayes, 2003; Ecclestone, 2004a) is being increasingly used in contemporary education policy studies to identify learning initiatives which are dominated by objectives linked to personal and social skills, emotional intelligence and building self-esteem. Contemporary educational goals connected with such strategies have been criticised for encouraging a 'victim culture' which marginalises learners and replaces the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with the development of personal values relevant to a life of social, cultural and economic risk and uncertainty (Furedi, 2003). In relation to vocational education and training (VET) and post-school policy trends in particular, Hayes (2003) has argued that preparation for work has abandoned vocational/occupational knowledge and skills in favour of providing learners with personal skills for emotional labour in low-level service jobs.

This paper interrogates such analyses and questions whether the therapeutic role of VET really is incompatible with the traditional objectives of developing knowledge, understanding and values in work environments. Links are made between new emphases on work-based learning and the 'caring' (Cripps, 2002) conceptions of learning in post-school education. It is concluded that – although therapy should not dominate VET – an attention to the important values dimension of learning in the field does involve a therapeutic dimension of some kind.

Introduction

The history of VET reform and policy developments in England can be described as a series of tragic narratives which – though often accurately characterising the key weaknesses to be remedied – have failed miserably to solve the central problems in this sphere. Attempts to raise the status of VET and create parity of esteem for vocational as against general or academic education and qualifications go back at least as far as the last quarter of the 19th century when a Royal Commission on Technical Instruction was set up to make recommendations for the improvement of

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the English system in the light of the emerging superiority of European models (Musgrave, 1970). Since then, the State's response to the key problems in this field has typically been one of 'crisis management…giving rise to schemes and initiatives designed to limit the social damage which followed de-industrialisation' (Esland, 1990, p.v). More recently, in introducing the University for Industry (now UfI Learndirect) blueprint, Hillman (1997) remarked that:

Deficiencies in British education and training have been a cause of concern for policy-makers for 150 years. Partly in response to world-wide recognition of the importance of lifelong learning, there has been a flurry of reforms in the last ten years. The result has been an array of short-term and narrowly focused initiatives which have confused rather than clarified the situation for the learner (pp.29-30).

Included in this 'flurry of reforms' were the many schemes associated with the 'new vocationalism' (Hyland, 1999) of the 1980s: the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative, Youth Training Schemes (YTS) , National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs), Training Credits and Training and Enterprise Councils. None of these came close to solving the problems of VET and some of them – in particular, NVQs and YTS – arguably managed to aggravate matters by devaluing vocational pursuits (Tomlinson, 2001; Hyland, 2002).

Since New Labour came to power in 1997 the reform programme in this sphere has been intensified. We have seen the introduction of UfI Learndirect, the Connexions one-stop careers advice and counselling service, Welfare to Work programmes, and the establishment of Learning and Skills and Sector Skills Councils. The fact that reform initiatives continue apace is clear evidence that the principal weaknesses have still not been remedied. In the last five years there has been the reconstruction of Modern Apprenticeships, the introduction of vocational GCSEs, and the re-organisation of 14-19 learning programmes and qualifications (Hyland & Merrill, 2003). The 2002 Green Paper on 14-19 reform asserted that 'we should no longer tolerate a culture that devalues vocational learning', and that the aim of the new system was a 'vocational renaissance that captures the imagination of young people and challenges prejudice' (DfES, 2002, p.1).

This prejudice continues to be challenged through reform programmes for schools, further and higher education in the drive to enhance and upgrade vocational studies. The most recent initiative is the report of the Tomlinson Committee on the 14-19 curriculum and qualifications reform. There is a strong emphasis on bridging the vocational/academic divide through improved and 'better vocational programmes'

which 'provide opportunities for achievement and progression in the same ways as for academic studies'. The report goes on to stress that this

Does not mean trying to fit vocational programmes into an 'academic' mould, but recognising what is distinctive and valuable about vocational learning and ensuring that it is respected and valued in its own right (DfES, 2004, p.6)

In spite of the widespread support for these proposals – and general consensus that the persistent problems of VET need to be addressed urgently – the DfES has recently effectively rejected the reforms with the determination to 'retain GCSEs and A levels as the cornerstones of the new system' (DfES, 2005,p.3). As Hodgson & Spours (2005) – both members of the Tomlinson committee – have commented in reference to the White paper, it is yet another 'great lost opportunity' and a 'depressing example of political expediency winning out over the professional consensus for a unified and inclusive 14-19 phase' (p.22).   This is a paradigm case of middle class political power and the dominance of middle class exclusive preferences in educational policy over the last two decades. As Tomlinson (2001) puts it, by the end of the 20th century:

there was a diverse and expanded middle class…whose needs took precedence in any competitive struggle for positional advantage in society…Although ameliorative strategies and initiatives were put in place, governments were aware that any policies which threatened middle class advantages, threatened electoral advantage' (p.140).

The Therapeutic Turn

Against the background of all these anomalies and tensions in the hectic reform of post-compulsory education and training (PCET) over the last twenty years, a number of commentators claimed to have detected a 'therapeutic turn' in educational developments. A key feature of this claim is that many PCET programmes are dominated by objectives concerned with personal and social skills, emotional intelligence and the enhancement of self-esteem, confidence and motivation in learners. Contemporary educational aims linked to such strategies are attacked for encouraging a 'victim culture' which marginalises learners and replaces the pursuit of knowledge and understanding with the development of personal qualities required for a life of social and economic risk and uncertainty (Furedi, 2003). Ecclestone (2004a) wonders 'why many educators regard the conferring of recognition and esteem on people deemed to be marginalised as a fundamental educational goal' (p.113). Concepts of 'self esteem' and 'emotional intelligence' are growing in popularity and leading to:

new professional activities in emotional management, life coaching, mentoring, counselling and interventions to build self-esteem and make people feel good emotionally in the pursuit of motivation, educational achievement and social inclusion (Ecclestone, 2004b, p.11).

In contemporary educational discourse the 'professional and popular support for these ideas' is so strong 'that they have become a new social and educational orthodoxy' (ibid.)

Hayes (2003) has advanced similar arguments and claims in investigating VET in particular and PCET policy in general. The argument is that – alongside the 'triumph of vocationalism' over the last few decades – there has been a 'triumph of therapeutic education' , a 'form of preparation for work' arising out of 'the changed nexus between work and education' (p.54). Hayes goes on to explain that:

The new vocational skills that are required in the workforce are sometimes called 'emotional' or 'aesthetic' labour. If PCE students are being trained in personal and social skills as well as in relationships, this is training in emotional labour…training in emotional labour…requires and receives a personal and wholehearted commitment to workplace values (ibid.)

What results is a form of VET in which the pursuit of knowledge – and the values of 'rationality, objectivity, science and progress' – are replaced by a set of post-modernist relativistic values concerned only with developing 'self-esteem' (ibid.).

The critique is broadened and deepened with the claim that:

All that society can offer is therapy and therapeutic organizations and initiatives to help adjust to the low expectations they are now expected to have. This explains how the government can focus so much on 'basic skills', an ill-defined idea that often includes personal qualities and attitudes. Talk about 'basic skills' means: 'Get used to having limited expectations and no aspirations' (p.55).

This bleak picture is completed with the trenchant and dire warning that:

As therapeutic education becomes the norm…the individualized and fractious workforce will be replaced by a workforce of the future in which every worker will be concerned with enhancing their own self-esteem and that of others. This future is not going to be a new creative age…The therapeutic future will be static and dull (ibid.)

Learning and Therapy: A Critique

Is this dystopian vision justified by contemporary PCET policy developments? More importantly, are these claims about a therapeutic turn legitimate, and do the new emphases amount to anything more than giving due and proper attention to the affective domain of learning?

Claims about the reduction of PCET to something akin to therapy, involving the subversion of traditional education/training aims by replacing knowledge and skill with personal qualities, are serious and merit our full attention. Such claims may be tested either empirically or philosophically. On the empirical side it is interesting that most of the examples Ecclestone (2004b) cites are drawn from the popular press and the field of counselling. She regrets the replacement of 'optimistic Rogerian ideas about humans' innate potential and drive for empowerment' with 'pessimistic images of people locked in cycles of social deprivation caused by emotional problems' (p.13). If this were true it would certainly be regrettable. However, it seems to me that – apart from a highly theoretical, inspirational impact akin to that of Freire on adult literacy tutors – Rogers has never had any *practical* influence on the English PCET sector, I would argue that the alleged pessimistic perspectives have a similar status.

Indeed, this picture of a post-school sector dominated by objectives linked to emotional intelligence and self-esteem is not one which is easily recognisable. On the contrary, policy studies (Ainley, 1999; Lea et al, 2003) suggest that the key trends in PCET over recent years have been the rise of skill-talk, prescriptive learning outcomes and the dominance of competence-based education and training (CBET). The so-called therapeutic turn pales into insignificance alongside the damage wreaked by CBET and the behaviourist outcomes movement, bringing with it the radical de-skilling of countless occupations, the downgrading of vocational studies, and the rise to prominence of a perversely utilitarian and unduly economistic conception of the educational enterprise in general. Emphasising self-esteem and affective objectives is far less dangerous than suggesting that all that matters in education and training is the achievement of narrow, mechanistic performance outcomes.

Moreover, given the fact that most learners in the post-16 sector are either studying (increasingly *re-sitting* these days) for GCSEs/A-levels or pursuing vocational qualifications, the notion that such programmes are more than marginally concerned with building self-esteem or emotional intelligence is difficult to accept. On the contrary, it could be argued that much of this learning is grossly *deficient* in precisely this affective area; it does not connect or engage sufficiently with the emotions, values and wider interests which learners bring with them to post-compulsory institutions. Similarly, it is difficult to make sense of Hayes' equation of basic skills teaching with inculcating low expectations in students. For learners, young or old, who achieved little at school and associate learning with anxiety, grief and failure, a

'therapeutic' concern with foundational skills, attitudes and motivations may be exactly what is required.

Claims that there is 'little agreement amongst psychologists about what self-esteem is' and 'virtually no evidence about its effects' (Ecclestone, 2004b, p.13) are not quite justified. It is true that 'self-esteem' (a macro, universal concept) is sometimes confusingly conflated with 'confidence' (a micro, task-specific concept) but both concepts have a central place in learning theory research and literature. There are many studies which demonstrate the importance of self-esteem and related notions to effective learning (Heckhausen & Dweck, 1999; NIACE?) and our own work with PCET trainee teachers at the University of Bolton (Norman & Hyland, 2003) showed clearly that building confidence needs to go hand in hand with mainstream learning objectives. Without task-specific interventions to overcome problems of confidence, even well-qualified students with extensive work experience can fall by the wayside. In the case of disaffected youngsters with little experience of success and achievement at school, such 'therapeutic' strategies become absolutely vital.

What of the philosophical connections between learning and therapy? As Wilson (1972) has argued, there are many links and overlaps between education (before this was replaced by the ubiquitous 'learning' label) and therapy. He suggests that:

Education involves initiation into activities, forms of thought, etc. which conceptually must be…worth while or justifiable. Different types of justifications, or different descriptions of the mode in which they are worth while, may apply to different activities or groups of activities. Thus some may be called 'therapeutic', others described as 'enlarging the personality'… These justification phrases may be said to represent the 'aims of education'; and 'therapeutic' or 'contributing to mental health', may represent one such aim (pp.91-2).

Moreover, both learning (education) and therapy involve the development of knowledge, understanding, reason, skill, experience and insight, and both may be equally necessary for accessing work, social relationships and wider communities of practice.

Learning, Therapy and VET

The twin pillars of contemporary lifelong learning policy and practice are the development of vocational skills for economic prosperity and the fostering of various forms of social inclusion. Although links are made between the two, economic capital is always given pride of place, and social capital lies overlooked and hidden behind vague slogans about social justice, citizenship and diversity. The values dimension covered by what has been called therapeutic education becomes significant here,

and the new work-based learning (WBL) initiatives which have been central to much recent VET reform (Hyland, 2003) have a potentially important role to play.

General empirical research on the ways in which people acquire knowledge, skills and values in new settings has confirmed the importance of social as opposed to individualised learning, even in the sphere of information technology in which solitary learning has been foregrounded (Guile & Hayton, 1999). What Lave & Wenger (2002) have called 'legitimate peripheral participation' concerns the ways in which newcomers – and, interestingly, workplace learning through forms of apprenticeship is cited as a paradigm case here – come to acquire the skills and values that enable them to move from being outsiders to insiders. It is argued that 'newcomers participate in a community of practitioners as well as in productive activity' and that it is important to view 'learning as part of a social practice' (pp.121-2). Thus, it could be claimed that WBL – in addition to fostering the occupational knowledge and skills that make up 'economic' capital – can, through workplace practice, also facilitate the development of the valuable 'social' capital which is located in the 'kinds of contexts and culture that promote communication and mutual learning as part of the fabric of everyday life' (Schuller & Field, 1998, p.234).

Conclusion: VET, Values and Caring

If therapeutic education involves fostering the skills and values generally associated with helping people to gain access to positive social relationships in all spheres of community life then VET has, arguably, always been a vehicle for promoting such access. Certainly, this function has not always been performed well as the critical studies of modern apprenticeships (Unwin & Wellington, 2001) and other training schemes (Lee et al, 1990) have demonstrated. However, the potential value of WBL is clear, and its centrality to so much current VET innovation means that there has never been a better time to exploit this potential.

In terms of the PCET sector in general, the predominance of vocational programmes provides an ideal opportunity for countering the relentlessly economistic and narrowly utilitarian tendencies of recent times. Cripps (2002) has distinguished between the 'market' and 'caring' codes which have characterised FE learning in recent years, and regrets the dominance of the former which has created a 'parity of difference' (p.87) between different types of student achievement which devalues much vocational learning. She argues that 'placing further education colleges in a competitive market appears to serve neither the individual, employers, nor national

need' (p.269). Tuckett (2005) has suggested that the recent rejection of the Tomlinson proposals for 14-19 reform 'marks a low point in Labour's journey towards a lifelong learning culture' (p.23). In making a recovery from such a low point, there has never been a more important time to reassert the traditional 'caring' functions of FE which emphasise the importance of **all** student learning within the framework of close links between colleges and their communities (Hyland & Merrill, 2003).

Bloomer & Hodkinson (1997) have argued forcefully for the importance of 'studentship' and 'learning careers' as a way of allowing post-16 students to take ownership and make sense of whatever programmes they are engaged in. Such notions take on special significance in the context of vocational learning in which students often need to be supported in making links between occupational knowledge and skills, basic education and workplace experience. If it is decided that the label for such approaches to learning support is 'therapeutic', then I would wish to include myself as an advocate of therapeutic VET.

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