

No Good Surprises: Intending-lecturers' preconceptions and initial experiences of Further Education.

***Abstract:** Current initiatives to promote life-long learning and a broader inclusiveness in post-16 education have focused attention on Further Education. This paper examines the experiences and reactions of forty-one FE intending-lecturers studying full time for a Postgraduate Certificate in Further Education and Training, as they enter FE colleges on teaching practice and encounter FE students for the first time. It argues that the sector may have something to learn from the contrast between these intending-lecturers' expectations and their subsequent experiences; and that attempts to address problems which are endemic within the current FE sector by initiatives to improve teacher competence, such as FENTO's recently introduced FE teacher training standards, are inadequate and misdirected.*

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Introduction

The investigation which is summarised and discussed in this paper was designed to throw light on two questions. These were: *What aspects, if any, of their intended professional role do intending FE lecturers feel unprepared for on their teaching practice?* And: *What implications does this have for the content and structure of full-time PGCE FE courses?* Throughout what follows, the course members of the various PGCE (FE) courses on whose experiences and reflections this paper draws are referred to as *intending-lecturers*. This is designed to avoid confusion when it becomes necessary to refer to the FE students whom they observe and teach during their teaching practice, or to the lecturers working in the host colleges where the practice takes place. The work was carried out against the background of the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO)'s development of standards for the qualification of in-service FE lecturers (FENTO, 1999); and of government initiatives to promote Lifelong Learning, widen participation in post-school education and training (DfEE 1998) and establish new funding and planning arrangements for post-16 education (DfEE 1999). All of these impact directly upon the FE sector. The investigation was based on their own accounts of

their experiences by forty-one intending-lecturers during their first term's teaching practice in FE colleges in the south of England. The PGCE (FE) courses which the intending-lecturers were following required them to complete between five and seven weeks' practical teaching during the Autumn term. They were asked to record their experiences, and their reflections upon these experiences during this period, in the form of a journal.

Intended as an evaluation strategy whose purpose was to judge how well the initial stages of these intending-lecturers' courses had prepared them for the reality of teaching in FE and to advise whether and how this preparation might be improved, the inquiry soon began to encounter issues about processes and quality in those areas of FE provision described and discussed in the intending-lecturers' journals. In other words, it became necessary and important to address the question not simply of whether the intending-lecturers were adequately prepared for what they encountered, but also of whether they should, or realistically could, be.

Apart from the study by McKelvey and Andrews (1998) of 16 trainee FE lecturers, little has been previously published on the perceptions of lecturers new to the FE sector. The main thrust of McKelvey and Andrews' investigation was to discover which aspects of their role their trainee lecturers found most attractive (p. 357); and although acknowledgement of current difficulties within FE is implicit in their attempt to identify training needs for dealing with conflict, their paper does not seek to question the reasons for conflict nor the instrumental solution of preparing new lecturers to cope with it. As Ball (1994) points out, "We tend to begin by assuming the adjustment of teachers and

context to policy but not of policy to context” (p. 19). This paper explores some of the questions which open up when that assumption is set aside.

There is a long literary tradition of utilising the viewpoint of the stranger or innocent sent abroad into the world to jolt us into recognition of the world as it really is. From *Candide*, *Gulliver*, and *Midshipman Easy*, to Iain Bank’s *Whit* (Banks 1995), this device can be used to throw light on aspects of governance, religion or social relations to which constant exposure has blunted our perceptions. We are allowed to view with new eyes; and we are thus enabled to see absurdities and contradictions which familiarity and custom have rendered invisible. Eco (1993) has referred to this process outside fiction as “alternative anthropology” (p. 4), and cites the example of a group of anthropologists visiting France from another continent and being, “amazed to find, for example, that the French were in the habit of walking their dogs” (ibid). The intending-lecturers’ journals fall into a similar category, which we could perhaps call *alternative ethnology*, using ethnology here very much in Ball’s sense of “engaging critically with, and developing interpretations of ‘the real’. [And]...giving voice to the unheard” (Ball 1994, p.4). The journals give a newcomer’s account of a lived experience of being inside FE colleges today - an account of ““what it is like”” (Ainley and Bailey 1997 p. ix). This seeing with new eyes can be regarded as a necessary first step in drawing our attention to areas for inquiry which might otherwise remain unexamined.

In the intending-lecturers’ journals no colleges emerged as “better” or “worse” than others. All forty-one journal accounts drawn upon here contain markedly similar observations. Indeed, it was this consistency of evidence which raised questions about the original premise of the inquiry and appeared to indicate that intending-lecturers’

unpreparedness for some of the conditions and situations they encountered highlighted problems that would not be resolved by changes to their education and training, but which rather demanded a careful critical scrutiny of current policies and practices.

FENTO's framework (FENTO 1999), to which I shall return in more detail later, sets out standards for teaching and the support of learning in FE; and reflects the target set in the Learning Age Green Paper (DfEE 1998) that all FE lecturers teaching full time or substantial part-time hours should undertake a professional teaching qualification. Financed partly through the FE Standards Fund, the framework is presented as a means of addressing standards in FE. The little research that exists into, for example, student absenteeism in FE, suggests that lecturers and their teaching are not significant causes of low attendance (Longhurst 1999). There is, however, an assumption implicit within the Learning Age Green Paper (DfEE 1998), and the FENTO framework (FENTO 1999) that better trained and qualified lecturers are the answer to raising standards of FE provision. Unfortunately, this assumption functions to pre-empt or silence alternative answers to the question, *what causes low standards in FE?* In addition, it presents a deficit model of the FE lecturer.

Methodology

The journal accounts from which the data for this inquiry were drawn were kept by intending-lecturers who were observing and teaching largely on GNVQ programmes. The accounts can best be described as an opportunity sample, being taken from those journals which were available for scrutiny on prearranged dates during the first term of the PGCE

programmes. If journals were unavailable it was because of the intending-lecturer's absence, either through illness or the timetabling of their teaching practice schedule. There is no reason, however, to believe that the sample is unrepresentative or exceptional. The intending-lecturers were asked to record and reflect upon their experiences of observing and teaching, with particular emphasis upon reflection (Harland and Myhill 1997). They were reassured that they had full editorial rights over their journals and would be able to withhold or delete any passages they wished before the journals were read by their tutor, myself or the external examiner. The intention was that the journals should not only encourage reflection but also serve as a record of the developmental processes of the PGCE programmes. This latter function gave grounds for seeing the journal as a useful source of data for ascertaining the preparedness of these intending-lecturers for the demands of their FE role. During the writing of the journals the intending-lecturers were not aware that their accounts would be used in this way, although permission for this use was sought before the journals were handed over for analysis. No intending-lecturer refused permission for their journal to be used as a source of data in this inquiry. As the journals were seen as being for the purpose of recording the intending-lecturers' reflections primarily for their own use, most of the writers have not bothered proof-reading for errors of spelling, grammar or punctuation. The passages quoted from the journals appear as they were originally written; but should not be taken as indicative of the intending-lecturers' level of formal literacy.

Intended as illuminative research, the inquiry was vulnerable to the difficulties associated with such work and its necessarily impressionistic and interpretative nature (Delamont 1978). Nevertheless the weight and consistency of the evidence contained in

the journals meant that selection and presentation could be made on the basis of what was both representative and illustrative of recurrent themes. The more difficult epistemological question is about the validity of using personal narratives and statements of value as a main source of data. I am taking the stance here that subjective truths can be counted as knowledge, but I am also stressing the consistency between these accounts. By taking note of the journal accounts we give weight to the “little stories” (Lyotard 1984). And by looking at how teaching in FE is experienced through new eyes it is possible that we might identify problems and solutions hitherto silenced or obscured by custom and preconception, or what Lyotard refers to as “dominating idioms” (Lyotard 1988).

In interrogating the issue of standards in FE it may be useful to reformulate the questions that we traditionally use. These have tended to be about recruitment (DfEE 1998), outcomes (DfEE 1999) and meeting the needs of industry (DfEE 1999). We might, however, pose another set of questions, not necessarily to replace but rather to contextualise or extend the traditional ones. These alternative questions would be about the lived experience of learning and teaching in FE; about student attitudes as manifested in their behaviour; about student response to current policy and provision, as reflected in their levels of punctuality and attendance and their appetite for learning. These are difficult questions which demand qualitative rather than quantitative methods of enquiry; and this may be one reason why they tend rarely to be addressed. As both Lyotard (1984) and Rorty (1989) argue, our perception of what is a problem is limited because we cannot step out of the vocabularies we inhabit or employ; but by adopting new vocabularies, by reconfiguring the questions that we ask, we might throw new light on an old conundrum

such as how we define successful or effective FE. There is a difficulty here, of course, as Rorty (1989) points out; and that is that anything can be given or deprived of value by being redescribed. Nevertheless, that redescription may be enlightening. One of the purposes of this paper is to redescribe the issue of standards in FE so that we can consider it for a moment not in terms of retention or recruitment or end qualifications, but in terms of the quality of the FE experience measured by, amongst other things, the quality of personal interaction in the classroom; the degree of student apathy or enthusiasm; the level of teacher satisfaction; and, above all, *whether students and staff want to be there and find being there worthwhile*. These are questions about how FE *feels* to participants. The intending-lecturers' journals can answer these questions in a way that an inspector's report on the one hand and abstract theorising on the other cannot do. It is my intention in this paper to turn away temporarily from theory towards narrative (Rorty 1989 p. xvi), and from fixed criteria towards "little stories" (Lyotard 1984), in order to allow the little narratives of new participants in FE to illustrate what sort of questions we should be asking.

The Journal Accounts

The common themes and observations from the journals are presented and discussed here under three main headings: *Students; FE Staff; and College Infrastructure*. Examples and direct quotations are offered as representative and illustrative of journal content. Names of people and places have been omitted or anonymised. This section concludes by emphasising the over all positive and enthusiastic

response of these intending-lecturers despite the incidents and misgivings expressed in the journals.

Surprised by Students: Journal entries about FE students were based not only upon intending-lecturers' own first experience of teaching but also upon their observations of classes taught by experienced FE lecturers within their host institutions. These comments and reflections fall into two broad categories which I shall call student behaviour and student ability. All the journal writers had been asked at the outset of their course to record why they were choosing to teach in the FE sector rather than in schools, since only two out of these forty-one student lecturers had any prior personal experience of FE. The most commonly recurring answer was that they wanted to teach willing students who had moved beyond compulsory education; students who "want to be there." The journals went on to chart a growing disillusion with this initial assumption.

One of the aspects of student behaviour noted with surprise early on by all journal-keepers was the low level of punctuality and attendance displayed by students in all classes, whether those taught by intending-lecturers themselves or by the experienced FE staff whom they were observing. It is interesting to see how the journal-keepers do not simply record or bemoan this behaviour, but attempt to make sense of it by taking it as, for example, an indicator of low student motivation, or as an explanation of why FE staff seemed disheartened. In other words, they begin by attempting to learn from what they observe, to utilise it for their professional development. The following entry concerns a class scheduled to start at 10.30:

By 10.45 I had as close to a full class as I have experienced, i.e. five....

The timekeeping of the students was familiar and underlines the problems the staff have in planning a lesson and working through the curriculum.

Others tell a similar story:

After a large number of them arrived late, and several decided to go to the toilet after the start of the session, I quickly realised this was not a highly motivated group.

And:

The poor attendance of the first and second year GNVQ students is becoming an increasing concern and the continued absence of certain students places the courses (sic) existence in jeopardy. It is difficult to know how to approach the problem as many are quite simply arrogant when quized (sic) about their attitude.

Journal-keepers record instances of “absences in spirit” too, the most common of which is the tendency of students to make and receive telephone calls during class. As one writer wryly observes:

After taking the register and requesting all mobiles be switched off, I began.

The widely reported failure of students to complete classroom tasks and coursework was another source of surprise, particularly as most of the students with whom the journal-keepers came into contact were on GNVQ courses which are continuously assessed and where success depends upon completion of such tasks. The following extracts from two journals give a flavour of these entries:

There certainly appears to be a leniency beyond any experience I have encountered & a toleration of students failing to complete assignments on time that I feel can be of little benefit to anyone.

And:

I am not sure I could tolerate the level to which some students for what ever reason fail to complete tasks.

This surprise at what they were expected to tolerate extends also to general classroom behaviour. The following extract provides a mild example, representative of journal-keepers' day-to-day entries:

None of the girls like (sic) to listen to anyone for more than about ten minutes. None of them like (sic) to stay for the full two hours.

Furthermore all of them let you know precisely how they feel when they don't like the lesson. T starts drumming tunes on the table and asking "This isn't bothering you at all, is it?" I say, "Well, would you have liked me to drum right the way through your presentation last week?" and she

says “Yeah.”

One of the things to note here is that day-to-day incidents like these initially have the effect of making intending-lecturers more self-critical. The journal-keeper who made the above entry goes on to observe with some humour,

I was so upset when I came home that I turned over the picture of Carl Rogers I've got on my bedside table. He wouldn't have wanted to see me like this, I know.

The allusion here is to Rogers' (1983) idea that teachers should give their students *unconditional positive regard* in order to foster learning. This journal-keeper is representative in assuming that such student behaviour as he describes reflects some failure of his own in his relationship with them. The idea that the causes of such behaviour may be systemic simply does not occur at this stage. However, as the evidence builds up that such behaviours are common in most of the classes that they observe and in most that their peers observe in other colleges, many of the journal-keepers begin to explore the question of whether this implies a deficit in FE teachers' practice, or whether there is *another explanation* which no amount of FE teacher training will address. I shall take up this point again later in the paper.

Surprise at student behaviour was matched by surprise at the low level of student ability. It has to be said that journal-keepers, by their own account, did not necessarily go

into FE expecting to encounter only very able and motivated students as this extract, representative of views expressed early in the term, illustrates:

I feel that keeping open the door to education is F.E.'s most important and socially valuable function. There are so many reasons why some children do not achieve at school, that to write them off without a second chance would be to commit a profound injustice, both at a personal and societal level.

However, many of the journals record surprise at the degree to which students need to be “spoon-fed” and at their generally low standards of spelling and grammar. The inability or unwillingness of whole student groups to meet course requirements was the subject of much journal comment and reflection, which is illustrated by the following extracts:

The academic standard of most of the class is disheartening, their attention span is difficult to locate and their resistance to new ideas is phenomenal.

And:

Blank expressions greeted their initiation to the theories, and a refusal to entertain the idea of learning such notions.

And:

It's tough getting them to listen for more than a few minutes together.

The problems identified are not only of concentration and comprehension. Widely reported are difficulties with practical skills such as note-taking:

I noticed that very few of them were attempting to make notes, and, although I had prepared some printed handouts for them, I suggested that as Advanced students they should be developing their note-taking skills;

and an inability or unwillingness to generate ideas:

It was for me strange to see how difficult this freedom seemed to be for them. They were relatively happy copying the style of a given newspaper but lost when it came to creativity. Is this the result of present education policy? Perhaps they just need more time to think.

One journal-keeper sums up his over all impressions in this way:

One of the problems I have felt with the teaching [in FE] is an unnecessary “dumbing down” which leaves staff and students unfulfilled.

Clearly, there is a link to be made between student behaviour and student ability, since students who cannot cope with the level of work demanded may well demonstrate the

whole range of behaviours described in these journal extracts. Amongst the questions raised by these observations, therefore, there is an obvious one relating to policies and practices of recruitment and retention in FE; and I shall return to this point later.

Surprised by Lecturers: Surprise expressed in relation to the FE lecturers whom the journal-keepers encountered is, broadly speaking, on one of two counts: the weight of lecturers' workload and lecturers' high tolerance and low expectations of their students. One intending-lecturer, for example, records being told by his mentor that their

main expectation of students should be their attendance and little else - the basic role being primarily to baby-sit them through the course.

Another records that,

during my first week I observed teachers allowing students to come and go as they pleased, talk while they were talking and eat packets of crisps etc; throughout the lesson.

Accounts of lecturers tolerating or ignoring inappropriate behaviour recurred throughout the journals like a refrain. In the following extract the intending-lecturer begins tentatively to work towards an explanation based not on a deficit model of lecturers but upon the possibility that the current funding policy might produce anomalous outcomes.

The main issue that arose in my mind today was the students' lack of attention in two class (sic) that I joined. They were taught by the same tutor who tended largely to ignore the constant talking that went on throughout most of the two sessions. Low key control was occasionally attempted but not sustained. On talking to the tutor afterwards it was admitted that he feels there is little he can do to improve the situation; if he were to try heavier methods he fears that many students would rise to the challenge and become even more disruptive. I guess there's a certain apprehension about being too heavy-handed in case it causes students to drop out, which would result in a loss of on-programme funding. Obviously this would not please management. Whilst I appreciate the tutor's dilemma, I wonder how far such bad manners from students must be tolerated. Moreover, are they actually learning anything?

In essence, this journal-keeper is positing an ironic situation in which a lecturer's insistence that students buckle down and learn (rather than simply, if only sporadically, attend) might risk a loss of funding to the college. Other intending-lecturers pick up this theme and take it further, reflecting upon the possibility that students may well be aware and therefore able to take advantage of the fact that lecturers feel their scope for classroom management is hobbled in this way. This one begins the journal entry by remarking on the apparent conformity of a *laissez-faire* teaching style which seems to be, in his words, "endorsed" by his host college, and goes on to say,

The style of delivery accepted encourages student deviance which should not be tolerated, but it is not our place to suddenly enforce more stringent discipline - the students know our position and wouldn't take it seriously.

Another describes instances of challenging behaviour from students and continues:

Whether this stems from them knowing staff are in no position to kick people off the course, or whether it is a simple reflection of their character, does not alter the problems this causes for lecturers.

Concern about the degree to which FE lecturers are seen to be under pressure is another recurring theme in the journals. Typical of these entries is the following, written towards the end of the teaching practice block;

It is noticeable (sic) how the staffroom is becoming more tense as the ever-mounting administration piles up & the pressure builds on staff, who clearly feel under-paid and under-valued.

Surprised by FE Policies and Infrastructures: Journal observations and reflections on policy and infrastructure tended to be relatively brief, since the primary purpose of the journal was to encourage reflections on practical teaching. However, again there is a consistency in terms of the issues identified as unexpected. There is, for

example, a frequent questioning of recruitment policy and expressions of astonishment that students should be recruited on to courses for which they lack the basic entry skills or the motivation.

I am forced to question what a student with obvious communication problems is doing on a course so reliant on group-based coursework.

And:

[The tutor] is a good lecturer with experience to envy, but the class refuse to display enthusiasm or initiative, and their lack of motivation leaves him perplexed.

One intending-lecturer, reflecting upon the reasons that prompt FE students to enrol, comments that,

I am beginning to wonder if it is overly optimistic to expect enthusiasm from students.

The nature of social and political structures within the colleges also caused surprise to the journal-writers, who seem to have had expectations of a more egalitarian and collegiate culture. One declared,

It suddenly strikes me that some individuals in FE are fairly powerful & to some extent we (I) must play the “game” by their rules in order to succeed.

Another confessed surprise at the “*polarity between management and teachers*” and described them as,

two armed camps, in a very Marxist sense. This is reflected in the difference in accommodation - shabby staffrooms and luxurious, carpeted (sic) boardroom - the total lack of integration.

This feeling that the low status and value attributed to lecturers was implicit in the provision made for them was voiced in several of the journals, particularly in relation to staffroom accommodation:

*From conditions in the staffroom you get the idea that the management think there’s no academic side to our work.
It’s surprisingly noisy (sic) and the phones go all the time.*

This last observation reflects the increasingly observed divide between those who manage the institution and those who teach in it (Ball 1994; Reeves 1995; Ainley and Bailey 1997).

One would imagine from reading these extracts that the intending-lecturers would have reached the end of the term feeling dispirited and demotivated. Interestingly, for most of them at least, this was not the case. The journals tended to conclude the term on a note of resolution and hope, such as this one:

I believe the placement has been invaluable in my development, and although it has introduced me to the internal squabbings and dissatisfactions within FE it has also wet (sic) my appetite for teaching and proved to me that teachers can make a positive difference.

A less positive tone than this might tempt us to take some of the journal narratives less seriously and to assume they were simply recording the complaints of undermotivated or failing practitioners. The over all impression created by these extracts is certainly very different from that reported by McKelvey and Andrews (1998), where the emphasis is upon what the intending lecturers “find attractive” about teaching in FE. This is not to say, however that a similar level of enthusiasm and commitment was absent from the journal accounts under consideration here, but rather that the thrust of this investigation was to discover what aspects of FE had surprised the intending lecturers; and there appeared, on the whole, to have been no good surprises. The fact that the journal-keepers nevertheless displayed qualities of humour, determination and dedication is as important to bear in mind as the consistency of the narratives they present.

Implicit Expectations

Based upon the journal-writers' accounts of what surprised them about their experiences of FE and why, we can construct some idea of what their expectations of FE were before they began their teaching practice. These expectations can, I suggest, be summarised as follows:

- * Most students would be capable of the level of work demanded by the course upon which they were enrolled, and would be willing to cooperate or take an active part in their learning process.
- * A standard of behaviour would prevail which was conducive to learning and to positive teacher-student interactions.
- * Most FE lecturers would expect and require such behaviour
- * The major objective both of FE lecturers and FE students would be that students achieved the specified learning outcomes.

These could be further broken down, but they will suffice here as a fair representation of the expectations implicit within the journal accounts. Set out like this, they appear to be entirely reasonable, even modest, expectations, unlikely to strike the reader as overly idealistic. Indeed, as a Platonic ideal of FE, this could be described as fairly undemanding. And yet what the journal-writers are telling us is that their experience of FE colleges fell below even these modest expectations; and that, on the contrary, what they found was that:

- * Many of the students did not appear capable of meeting the demands of their course, nor willing to cooperate in their own learning.
- * The prevailing standards of behaviour were detrimental to student learning and to teacher-student relations.

- * Most FE teachers appeared resigned to, and unwilling to challenge, this behaviour.
- * Student learning was not always a central concern and was not always assumed to be a reasonable expectation.

Summarised in this way, the intending-lecturers' experience of FE is shocking; and this is perhaps precisely because it gives us the newcomer's view. An education sector in which so many students do not wish or try to learn - indeed, are often not *expected* to learn - should be as startling to us as the idea of taking a dog for a walk was to those anthropologists from another culture.

Policy, Rhetoric and the Real Thing

I should like to begin this section by expanding upon two points I made earlier and promised to return to. They concern ways in which we might seek to explain these student attitudes and behaviours, and the limitations we place on our thinking when we make the assumption that these can be addressed through the re-writing or expansion of initial teacher training for lecturers. The first is that, although students' uncooperative behaviour or poor performance is not necessarily explained by reference to some deficiency in their lecturers, current policy and rhetoric nevertheless appears to take it for granted that poor standards are most likely to be explained by poor teaching. As a result there is no encouragement to look for causes elsewhere. The FE Standards Fund of £125 million, announced by the Secretary of State for Education at The Association of Colleges (AoC) annual conference in 1998, is specifically targeted at improving teaching, updating FE teachers' subject skills, and spreading the existing good practice notwithstanding which, claims Blunkett, "there is also too much poor or inadequate

teaching” (Blunkett 1998, p2). Meanwhile, the development of the FENTO (1999) standards has been driven by the aim expressed in the Learning Age Green Paper (DfEE 1998) that all new FE lecturers should already hold, or have at least begun a recognised initial teacher training qualification within two years of taking up post. The strategy of addressing standards in FE by focusing on the teachers and their teaching appears, in these contexts, a perfectly reasonable one. The difficulty arises, however, when the thinking goes no further; when teachers and their teaching are presented as the main, or even sole, problem to be solved in the drive to raise standards. However reasonably expressed, it is still possible to see this deficit model of the teacher as perpetuating a ‘discourse of derision’ (Ball, 1990 p. 18). Characteristic of a discourse is that it takes certain things as givens and does not question them. It validates certain ways of thinking and makes others impossible. In the FENTO standards (1999) we see two discourses operating together. One is about teachers’ deficiencies as the prime cause of low standards; and the other is about the efficacy of instrumental, competence-based training for all levels of educational and training needs.

As a means of equipping FE lecturers for their role within FE colleges, it could be argued, as Bleakley (1999) does, that the FENTO framework has serious conceptual flaws. These include “an unacknowledged, anti-intellectual pragmatism” (Bleakley 1999 p.1); a failure to designate the level at which the standards must be achieved (thus creating a semantic confusion by the very use of the word, ‘standard’); and an overdeterminism which leaves no room for “the legitimization of standards generated by idiosyncratic practice.” (ibid p. 6). In effect, the ‘standards’ are descriptive and prescriptive; and, although practitioners are encouraged to be reflective, no credit is

given for the propositional knowledge and resulting professional development arrived at through such reflection. The descriptive, instrumental nature of the FENTO standards is consistent with what Reeves (1995) refers to as “a narrow and inappropriate model of education and training... which has reduced individual opportunity for educational self-realisation” (p105) within the FE sector

FENTO’s instrumental framework is supplemented by a list of “Personal attributes” (FENTO 1999) which are to be demonstrated by the FE teacher. These include amongst others, “personal impact and presence”; “energy and persistence”; “assertiveness”; and “realism” (ibid). As a checklist of teacher attributes, qualities such as these are probably desirable; but it is difficult to fathom the use to which such a list might be put. Can such qualities indeed be taught or acquired? And can the individual teacher, even with such qualities as these, overcome some of the difficulties related earlier in this paper, such as how to help students who have been recruited on to courses for which they have neither the enthusiasm nor the ability? The checklist seems little more than an example of government by decree, like those about parity of esteem for vocational qualifications, suggesting the belief that repeated assertion of a principle will somehow make it so (Wallace 1998).

I have argued two things here: firstly that attempts to address standards in FE primarily by targeting its teachers is a limited and limiting response; and secondly that the framework to be offered for such development can in any case be shown to have epistemological and operational flaws. Let us then put teacher performance aside for a moment, and free ourselves to ask questions about what other factors might tend to produce classes with largely uncooperative, uninterested students. This is the second

point to which I promised to return. I shall consider three factors which might go towards providing alternative explanations of these student attitudes and behaviours. They are: the instrumental nature of the FE curriculum; the move since 1992 from a policy of regional planning for FE to a competitive market model; and the current FE funding mechanism's heavy reliance upon performance indicators. This list is not presented as prescriptive or exhaustive; but is intended to demonstrate that explanations are possible which do not rely on the deficit model of the lecturer.

The FE curriculum: One of the arguments put forward by Reeves (1995), is that the dominance of the work-related qualifications system may have rendered the FE curriculum less stimulating and less gratifying for its students, reducing the learning experience to a repetition of the skill to be acquired. He suggests that much of the FE curriculum now reflects "the tedium of the work routine" (p.103), and that because work is not expected to be enjoyable, there are suspicions about any work-related education that is experienced as pleasurable. There is, he claims, "a tacit acceptance that proper education is rewarded with accreditation, not by gratification." (p. 105). Moreover, the accreditation itself, even if successfully gained, will not necessarily be followed by success in the job market, and students' awareness of this is inevitably reflected in their levels of motivation. Halliday (1999) summarises this argument as follows:

"It is undoubtedly the case....that those who can acquire qualifications with only little extrinsic value are very unlikely to be able to exchange them to realise something that is intrinsically worthwhile...It is also therefore futile for Colleges of FE to concentrate their efforts on helping the maximum number of individuals

to acquire the maximum number of so-called competencies as if the exchange value of those competencies were all that mattered and as if their exchange value was high.” (p. 55)

The very expansion of post-16 education and training in which FE is central can be viewed as a means of temporarily occupying those who cannot be accommodated in employment (Ainley and Bailey 1997). Again, this has implications for students’ motivation, particularly those who find themselves continuing their education not by choice but as a last resort. Current government funding policy for FE makes explicit the sector’s role as one of servicing the economy. Where only ‘vocational’ courses are available, students who know that their prospects for employment are poor may find themselves on GNVQ courses, preparing for jobs they are unlikely to be offered.

The market: Another argument concerns competition and the market. Following the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992, the FE sector has experienced a shift in its provision from regional strategic planning to the purchaser-provider model. Indeed, the policy of free market competition as applied to education has had a more observable effect upon FE than upon any other sector (Ainley and Bailey 1997); and the consequences of this shift have already been cited in relation to the difficulties lecturers may experience with student engagement (Reeves 1995; Ainley and Bailey 1997; Perry 1999). There are broadly three issues here. The first is the loss of democratic control and accountability in which local variations in the need for provision are largely ignored in favour of a centrally-devised purchasing policy operated through the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). In effect, this means that the needs of the economy are

prioritised over the needs of the local population in which the college is situated. Ainley and Bailey (1997) found that many of the FE teachers whom they interviewed would welcome a return to local democratic control as preferable to domination by what Reeves (1995) refers to as “a self-perpetuating oligarchy of business people” (p.99). The suggestion here is that the wider needs of business do not necessarily coincide with the individual needs of local students; and that student motivation may be affected by this narrowing of options. In addition, in such a market, where the FEFC acts as key purchaser, the concerns of college senior managers and college lecturers are, as noted earlier, likely to diverge (Ainley and Bailey 1997), the latter remaining focused on students and curriculum while the former focuses increasingly upon finance and competition and on “imposing financial limits and disciplines in the practice of colleagues” (Ball 1994 p. 74). The consequent frustration of teaching staff may communicate itself to students, who are increasingly viewed not only as consumers of education but also as commodities within the FE market.

The second issue here is that the operations of the market within the post-16 sector have resulted in the rapid growth in the number of sixth forms (Wallace 1999). Competition with schools to recruit 16-year-olds, together with policy initiatives to direct low achieving or disenchanted pupils towards FE (e.g. Dearing 1996) may mean that the student profile of those attracted to FE colleges has changed. The financial strictures necessary to survival in a competitive market often mean an increase in class sizes and an increasing recourse to “resource-based learning” (Ainley and Bailey 1997), involving little, if any, teacher-student contact. These are developments which may well affect the

quality of the student's learning experience and therefore their willingness or ability to engage with their learning.

A third consequence of the market, and an important one, is the financial pressure it exerts on colleges to recruit and retain students. This may lead to students finding themselves on courses which are above - or below - their level of ability (ibid); or to institutional toleration of unacceptable student behaviour because of pressures to retain rather than exclude. As Adrian Perry, Principal of Lambeth College, points out, “[C]olleges have a huge financial disincentive to classify a student as left, and so the FE league tables show implausibly high retention rates alongside implausibly low achievement rates.”(Perry 1999 p.6).

Performance Indicators: A final piece of the equation, which links the market, funding, and the work-related qualification system, is the use of performance indicators as part of the funding mechanism for FE. This measuring of input and output - enrolments and qualifications gained - places no emphasis on process, other than the need for its cost-effectiveness. The process is, in effect, the students' (and the lecturers') lived experience of the course or programme of learning, about which retention and qualification rates alone may be an unreliable indicator of quality. As Reeves (1995) points out, performance indicators can only be applied to what is easily measured. Other factors are omitted. “The performance indicators are then treated as measures of the whole complex process.” (p.97). Somewhere in this process are the factors that encourage or discourage the individual student's motivation and co-operation. These can be overlooked because the performance indicators may be “measuring what is easy, not what matters.” (Perry 1999 p.4). There are other difficulties presented by performance

indicators which are equally relevant to the accounts that intending-lecturers give of their FE experience: the contradictions apparent between high retention and high achievement, since students who find a course too difficult would tend to leave; and those between raising standards and widening participation, as the recruitment of previously overlooked groups will include those who may have difficulties with learning (ibid p.11).

A less obvious but arguably more destructive consequence of the emphasis on performance indicators is the emergence of a culture of performativity which Ball (1999) defines as, “a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation, or a system of ‘terror’ in Lyotard’s words, that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as a means of control, attrition and change.” (p. 2). The drive towards optimum performance - constantly measured, constantly judged - at both practitioner and institutional level, is “a recipe for ontological insecurity” (ibid), liable to result in “inauthentic practice and relationships.” (Ball 1999 p.11). If we accept this as reflecting the situation in FE colleges, it is difficult to see how the imposition of additional performance criteria in the form of the FENTO standards can ameliorate existing dissatisfaction with student attitudes, ability and behaviours.

Conclusion

What I have been arguing here is that the situations and experiences which the intending-lecturers describe in their journals may be attributable to causes other than teacher performance. If this is the case - if difficult student behaviours, for example, may be directly linked to systemic factors such as national policies and practices - it will be ultimately unproductive - a short-term measure at the best - to seek the solution in teacher

training initiatives, whether FENTO's or some other. This is by no means to argue that teacher training for FE is unnecessary or undesirable. On the contrary, it is clearly neither of these things. But it is not, and should not be presented as, a panacea for the current ills of FE; for this shifts the scrutiny and the pressure to change from the system itself to the individual FE teacher whose power to change anything, including her or his own practice, is increasingly circumscribed.

Some anomalies remain between what these intending-lecturers observe and what is more widely reported. The claim, for example, that tying funding to achievement will result in colleges recruiting only the more able students (Breen and Purcell 2000) does not seem to be reflected in these journal narratives. Nor do students' own accounts of their FE experience, as reported to Ainley and Bailey (1997), appear to reflect any deep dissatisfaction or lack of motivation. And the less formal teaching style which the GNVQ imposes (Harkin and Davis 1996) although reflected upon in the journals, tends to be presented there as disadvantageous and detrimental to student learning, rather than as advantageous and productive as Harkin and Davis argue. But the FE sector is notoriously under-researched (Hughes, Taylor and Tight 1996; Cunningham 1999), and the contradictions here may simply be taken as pointers for further enquiry. Malcolm Wicks, Minister for Lifelong Learning, reported to the 1999 FEDA Research Conference that research in education has never been higher on the government's agenda. As possible topics for research in FE he drew attention to, amongst others, the need to learn how young people view their experience of college; why students who complete courses do so; and the effects of different methods of teaching on student learning (Wicks 1999).

Although none of these topics admits of possible flaws in national policies and practice, they do encourage further investigation of issues relevant to this paper.

Reeves (1995) suggests that one way to question the adequacy of a further education system which he describes as “totalitarian” and which tends to obscure “alternative lines of vision” (p. 93) is to take as a starting point a detached or disinterested point of view (p. 96). The journal accounts in the first section of this paper are there to serve this function; to give us a Martian’s eye view of policy in practice. From them I have argued that additional or revised training would not, in the long term, resolve the problems the intending-lecturers experienced and observed; and that in order to bring about effective change, it is necessary to take into account not only what is easily measurable but also how the lived experience of FE feels to its participants. And, above all, that it is always worthwhile questioning commonsense assumptions such as that poor learning necessarily implies poor teaching.

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