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Position paper: Teachers, learning and pedagogy

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**Biographical note:**

Kevin Orr is Professor of Work and Learning at the University of Huddersfield. He worked in further education colleges for many years and his research remains largely focused on colleges and college teaching. He is currently leading a three-year national research project, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, on initial teacher education for science, engineering and technology teachers working in the further education sector.

Recent publications include:

Avis, J. and Orr, K. (2016) 'HE in FE: Vocationalism, Class and Social Justice' *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 21 (1-2), pp. 49-65.

Daley, M., Orr, K. & Petrie, J. (Eds) (2015) *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*. London: IOE Press.

**Position paper: *Teachers, learning and pedagogy***

This position paper raises issues relating to FE teachers, their context and the pedagogy they employ. According to a report published by the Education and Training Foundation in 2015, there are an estimated 122,600 teaching staff in English colleges (70,900 full-time equivalent). Two out of three of these teachers are part-time (compared with one in four of school teachers) and their median pay is in the band £30-31,000. This national figure for pay obscures significant regional differences, but FE teachers are in general paid less than their colleagues in schools. In the year 2013-14 the turnover of teaching staff was 15.9%, still improved on the previous year. Some subjects were much worse affected and the figure for staff in engineering, technology and manufacturing was 22%, down by 2.3% on the previous year (all figures from ETF 2015), which still suggests difficulties in expanding this crucial area of FE provision despite government plans.

Keeping good teachers in colleges matters. Nevertheless, in a recent survey of 240 senior managers in FE colleges, City and Guilds (2016) found only 2.5% placed staff retention and development as top priority for the next eighteen months, although 30% ranked as the main challenge for the same period "Ensuring staff have the required capabilities", only surpassed by "Learner performance" at 31.67%. The top ranking priority for these senior leaders in the sector was, however, the Area Reviews. This points to the uncertainty and insecurity that have been endemic in the sector and which sap the energy of those who work there as they strive to keep up with constantly changing demands (see Orr 2012 for the effects on three new teachers). The specific context in which FE teachers currently work is one where as a direct result of central government policy around the Area Reviews, colleges may close and staff may face redundancy (see also Keep 2014 for a clear account of the actual and anticipated impact of reduced funding for FE). Coffield et al (2014) have called for teachers to look beyond current policy-led 'bulimic learning', but any such call may be unheard or unheeded if teachers and managers alike are defending their institutions and their jobs. Maxwell (2014) concluded in her overview of work-based learning for teachers in the sector, that the "literature indicates that [lifelong learning sector] workplace conditions often inhibit teacher learning". So, as Coffield (2014: 153) asks "Can we transform classrooms and colleges without first transforming the role of the state?" That is, can we improve teaching and learning without at least providing stability for the sector?

This unstable background may influence the success or failure of any intervention around pedagogy in the FE sector. One illustration of this is the project that I lead, which has had to focus on initial teacher education rather than CPD because FE teachers did not have time to engage in professional development during a pilot study. Nevertheless, our current three-year project, funded by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation, has the ambition to better understand and enhance the subject-specialist pedagogy of teachers of vocational science, engineering and technology in colleges. We are designing an intervention, using face-to-face and on-line resources, which we will implement during participating trainee teachers' ITE to develop their vocational pedagogy. We will then research what impact, if any, this intervention has had before sharing our resources and findings.

Our project builds on the work of others including Lucas et al (2012) with whom we agree "that serious consideration of pedagogy is largely missing in vocational education and...vocational learners are the losers as a result of this omission" (Lucas et al., 2012: 13). Making explicit the connection between teachers' pedagogical decisions that relate to a particular group of students and the knowledge associated with particular vocational fields is central to our aim. Our approach is informed by the final report of the Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL) which found "The best vocational teaching and learning combines theoretical knowledge from the underpinning disciplines (for example, maths, psychology, human sciences, economics) with the occupational knowledge of practice (for example, how to cut hair, build circuit boards, administer medicines)" (CAVTL 2013: 15). The intervention that we are designing is underpinned by Bernstein's concept of the recontextualisation of knowledge (see for example Evans et al 2010). Shulman's concept of pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman 1987) has also been helpful in formulating how what teachers know should inform the decisions they make.

Though enhancing vocational pedagogy in the FE sector is worthwhile in its own right, there is a social justice imperative because of the social divide between those who follow academic or vocational routes. That returns us to the importance of knowledge on vocational courses, which can "open up opportunities rather than constrain and limit futures" (Bathmaker, 2013: 88).

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**Key issues for discussion:**

- What do we know about the relationship between the unstable context of FE colleges and the quality of teaching and learning?
- How can we research and evaluate pedagogy in vocational education and training?
- What constitutes useful knowledge on vocational courses?