

## Chapter 6 Professionalism without autonomy

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Meeting a new neighbour many years ago, I was pleased to find out she was a teacher at a local school. “I too am a teacher” I declared eagerly. “Where do you teach?” asked my new neighbour. “At the FE college” I replied enthusiastically. “Ah” she said making a face, “you’re not a real teacher then”.

That was in the late 1980s, when teachers working in Further Education (FE), often at a ‘Technical College’ or the ‘TEC’ were considered to be expert vocational instructors training apprentices along with a motley crew of ‘O’ and ‘A’ level teachers, artists, writers and some philosophers. The TEC was flexible and without romanticising it, it worked to meet local needs in terms of vocational and adult education. It was the world satirised by novelist Tom Sharpe in *Wilt* ([1976] 2002) and subsequent books. Despite the changes that have been transforming FE colleges since their incorporation in 1993, this folk memory endures, even if Sharpe’s novels are no longer part of lecturers’ frames of reference.

Now, as then, FE lecturers appear to be stranded in a professional wilderness, deemed to fall short of the virtuous school teachers, and lacking the academic credentials of university lecturers.

One response to this apparent lack of status was an attempt to re-professionalise the FE workforce, most notably through the work of its first professional body, the Institute for Learning (IfL), by far the most salient event in the recent history of professionalism in FE. Since its launch in 2002, the IfL was backed by many stakeholder organizations like the National Association of Teachers in Further and Higher Education (NATFHE) and the Association of Colleges (AoC) and had the blessings of the government as it was an important feature of *Equipping Our Teachers for the Future*, New Labour’s seminal policy paper on teacher education and training in FE (DfES 2004).

The IfL approach was simply to promote and market the idea of FE lecturers were ‘professional’, even that they had a ‘dual professionalism’. This concept embraced the

inherent dichotomy that is the FE teacher being part vocational practitioner/expert and part teacher/lecturer. But the celebration of the dual professionalism of FE teachers has not led to improved professional recognition.

At a rhetorical level the need for autonomy was also recognised by the IfL in its statement of values and beliefs which holds that: ‘our members should be trusted to exercise informed judgement’. But although this was an important assertion of principle, it is one that is open to interpretation, qualifications, and increasing political and institutional restrictions.

Professional autonomy may be better understood if we were to examine the perspectives of FE teachers from two different generations.

Three decades ago professional standing, or lack of it, was not an issue for most FE teachers as they got on with the job of teaching, which without romanticising it, involved providing a rich and diverse curriculum to young people and adults alike. They may not have been considered ‘real teachers’ but, nevertheless, they enjoyed a level of pedagogical integrity and classroom autonomy many teachers nowadays would envy.

In the passage below ‘Bill’, a now retired tutor, describes what it was like thirty years ago when he started teaching in an inner-city London college, in contrast to his later experiences:

“They were wonderful exciting times. Every day was different. You had complete freedom in the classroom to teach as you saw fit. No one looked over your shoulder constantly criticising, and you certainly didn’t have to justify yourself to managers or fill in endless paperwork. You decided what the students needed to know and how you should teach it and you got on with it. The curriculum was discussed in team meetings, proper team meetings where everyone had a say. The Head of Department was there but he didn’t order us about. It was very democratic. And none of this issue of being observed endlessly. We did peer teaching where you taught with a colleague and then discussed it afterwards. We were of course inspected by HMI, but they were different the inspections then. Best of all we had complete control of our teaching”.

The enthusiasm and optimism are still in his voice three decades later. Compare this reflection from a new and very articulate business studies lecturer ‘Amelia’ who has just completed her PGCE. After hearing Bill’s account she said:

“That’s interesting. I came into teaching full of enthusiasm and bursting with ideas but find myself routinely struggling to put them into practice. Every minute of my lesson seems to be planned for me by college managers desperate to achieve ‘quality’ through what seems to me to be ‘uniform conformity’. The lesson planning process is determined college-wide leaving little scope for subject-specific strategies. Not content with imposing the usual lesson plan proforma on all subjects regardless of mode of delivery, a new edict has been issued on the structure of the lesson imposing a format that prescribes what every 10minutes of the lesson should be focused on. Lessons are observed with minimum notice and will fail if they don’t conform to the imposed lesson structure. There’s no room for discussion or debate. Team meetings revolve around checking compliance rather than discussing what would make us good teachers, never mind anything like ‘Pedagogy’”.

These two accounts are not untypical and illustrate the changes teachers have experienced in the sector. What they show is that the drive to be a good teacher and an autonomous professional exists now as it did then for the teachers. The key difference is that now the relationship of the teacher to students is regulated by managers who ensure compliance to ‘professional’ standards, determined by Ofsted and an assessment driven curriculum which requires a formulaic teaching style. Three decades ago FE teachers had the freedom to interpret and deliver a flexible curriculum. Nowadays the curriculum is rigidly prescribed and outcome driven. It revolves around achieving competencies as opposed to knowledge and reduces the teachers to automatic deliverers and assessors of a skills package.

Working by the old adage that you don’t fatten a pig by weighing it, Bill illuminates the difference between assessing quality of teaching and learning then and now with a reminder of what inspections were like thirty years ago. “I had a message saying that an HMI was spending a few days with me going from class to class. I thought nothing of it. Afterwards, the inspector gave me some good advice and we had long debates about approaches to teaching”. Nowadays Amelia is unlikely to get much notice before an Ofsted inspector walks into her class unannounced to observe her and make a snap judgement about her teaching. No discussion, no advice, no debate.

### **The short unhappy life of the ‘new’ professionalism**

The steps towards a new regulatory professionalisation started with the Further Education National Training Organisation (FENTO) standards for teaching and learning, introduced in 2000, and the requirement for all teachers to be qualified by 2010. Although intensely

disliked, and in some quarters ignored, the FENTO standards nevertheless became a framework for teacher education if not for teaching itself within the sector. The consensus is that they were the first official blueprint for FE professionalism. So did these standards make us professionals?

The answer depends on how we define professionalism, and that in itself is contestable. It seemed that the New Labour government which came into office in 1997 was embarking on a re-conceptualisation of the term. In a speech to the Social Market Foundation in 2001, Estelle Morris, the then Secretary of State for Education and Skills signalled the end of old professionalism and the 'third way' search for a new accommodation between professionals and the government:

Gone are the days when doctors and teachers could say, with a straight face, "trust me, I'm a professional". So we need to be clear about what does constitute professionalism for the modern world. And what will provide the basis for a fruitful and new era of trust between Government and the teaching profession. This is an arena ripe for debate and we welcome views from all round the education system and from others, including parents and business people (Morris 2001:19).

It is interesting that New Labour sought to link professionalism, especially teacher professionalism, to the 'trust' of government in practitioners as opposed to the trust of those who seek the intervention of professionals. The fact was that government was already, through the FENTO standards, seeking to redefine professionalism from the top down and this signalled a move away from what is essential to professionalism: a community of practice of autonomous experts, self-governed and self-directed.

Five years after they were first introduced, the FENTO standards were deemed too 'vague' and unceremoniously discarded in favour of the more prescriptive 'Overarching Standards for Teaching and Learning in the Lifelong Learning' sector devised by the then new 'sector skill' council for FE, Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK). Coupled with the draconian tightening of Ofsted inspections and the introduction of a punitive code of practice, this ushered in the era of professionalism by regulation, prescription and sanctions.

The question we must ask ourselves is to what extent are we, in this regulatory era, capable of being autonomous, knowledgeable, self-directed professionals making judgments

individually and collegially about our own practice? I believe that many teachers in FE would struggle to recognise themselves as such. The effect of past policy initiatives has been to reduce the former autonomous teacher to a facilitator responding to changes to regulations, changes to the curriculum and changes to assessment. All interactions with students are now regulated, recorded and audited, even pastoral conversations which should be private. A description of the role that might be more readily recognised by teachers in FE is that of a check-out assistant handing out curriculum packets to ‘customer’ students.

### **Back to the future: a possibility of being more professional and autonomous?**

In November 2011, the Coalition government set up an Independent Review Panel into *Professionalism in Further Education*, led by Lord Lingfield, to judge the current state of FE teacher professionalism. It did just that in a report which condemned the current state of affairs and made some dramatic recommendations. The panel found that the statutory imposition of national occupational standards had been shown to have ‘failed to achieve consistency in the diverse provision for acquiring vocational knowledge and skills’ (Lingfield 2012: 2). The panel went on to state that they wished to see:

A change in the nature of the debate from ‘professionalisation’ of FE to supporting and enhancing the professionalism which we consider already exists, in the context of the government’s intention to increase the autonomy of providers and considering whether services which encourage a broad commitment to FE as a whole and to the body of knowledge and the values it represents might be strengthened (Lingfield 2012: 6).

They recommended that the 2007 regulations, that introduced mandatory teaching awards, should be revoked from 1 September 2012 and replaced by ‘a largely voluntary regime of in-service advanced practitioner training and CPD [Continuing Professional Development] for lecturers, based on advice to employers drawn up through consultation... (Lingfield 2012: 22).

In rejecting the restrictive and prescriptive form of professionalism that had developed in the sector and removing such things as the mandatory requirement to undertake thirty hours of CPD, some aspects of the Lingfield Report are welcome. But there is nothing like a return to Bill’s relative autonomy. Regulation will still be there through the Education and Training

Foundation (ETF) and college employers will have choice and flexibility in what training they require for their teachers.

Without being over-optimistic there is a possibility in a period of change to begin to debate what professionalism means, and to argue that 'professionalism' cannot be ascribed and 'autonomy' cannot be bestowed. If we begin a debate then the prospect of a more professional, autonomous FE sector may just become a possibility.

## **References**

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