

Title: "Beyond the Metaphor: Time to take over the castle"

It is telling that the metaphors we use to describe Further Education (FE) have come from fairy tales, and mostly involve oppressed princesses. We are either downtrodden Cinderella, the virtuous princess who toils as a servant selflessly day and night, or we are feisty princesses secretly defying our incarceration and having our moment on the dance floor. The escape into storytelling provides us with therapeutic release from the daily grind of the 'chalkface' and the exigencies of management.

The fairytale similes, though largely accurate and justifiable, nevertheless expose our embarrassing impotence. Even when the metaphor offers an empowering representation of FE such as in the story of the dancing princesses, the seemingly positive allegory conceals the perennial problem for the sector's teachers and lecturers. Subversiveness may be what we do, but it is a dangerous and ultimately failed strategy. For it is in that very act of subversiveness that we are reinforcing the loss of what lies at the heart of being a professional: autonomy, authority and trust.

'Trust me, I am a teacher'

Professionalism may be a contested concept, but it has become the Holy Grail we FE lecturers claim we once possessed and we must regain. Perhaps we forget that professionalism in its historic manifestation was not a bestowed attribute, but an asserted one (Crook 2008; McCullough 2011). What goes for being a 'professional' nowadays is the antithesis of what it was to be a professional in times past. For despite its 'slipperiness' (McCullough 2011) there are essential characteristics practitioners and writers have concurred on: a profession is generally an autonomous, self-directed and self-managed association of experts.

In defining professionalism as such it is easy to see that it has been a while since FE teachers have been 'professional'. There may be substance to the claim that they have been robbed of their professional status, but in seeking refuge in subversion, they are guilty of surrendering it.

Notwithstanding the inevitable evolution of professionalism as a social notion, the past three decades have seen a more direct attack on the professionalism of FE teachers from several quarters. Political exigencies have joined with managerial ineptness to undermine our authority and disciplinary expertise. But the more subtle and deeper undermining of FE teachers was not in the day to day operational control of their practice, but in the redefining of their contract with their public. Nowhere is that better articulated than in the speech by Estelle Morris, then New Labour's Secretary of state for Education, who speaking at the Social Market Foundation in 2001 not only

challenged the teaching profession to 'renew' itself but questioned its fundamental claim to its status :

*'The professionalism must renew itself and restate its claim to pre-eminence. We are a long way from helping teaching to measure up to and surpass our ideals for what a profession can be. Teaching must remodel itself to keep up to date. 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.'* (Morris, 2001)

In claiming that teachers had lost 'trust', the secretary of state was laying a dangerous accusation against the profession and appointing government as the broker between them and the public. Teachers had to change and the parameters and extent of that change was to be defined by politicians not the professionals. This was not only an attack on teachers' autonomy, but also on the profession's own ability to define its scope. Now it was over to government to remodel teacher professionalism in a way that suited the political whims of the times.

The attack although on teachers across all sectors, was particularly deep and cutting when it came to teachers in Further Education. The 1993 reforms which saw the establishment of a quasi-market in further education through the incorporation of FE colleges, had led to a de facto exile of the FE teacher from the professional club. Around that time a new neighbour moved next door to me. Upon meeting her I was delighted to find out she was a teacher at a local school. "I too am a teacher" I declared proudly. "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".

Then and now FE lecturers have been stranded in a professional wilderness, deemed to fall short of the virtuous school teachers, and lack the academic credentials of university lecturers. A view that has become more entrenched as 'skills' rather than 'education' became the policy and curriculum drivers.

But politicians and fellow teachers were not alone in casting doubt over our professionalism. Writers on education had already identified emerging problems. Donald Schön warned about 'The Crisis of Confidence in Professional Knowledge' as early as 1983 in the first chapter of his book *The Reflective Practitioner*.

In that chapter Schön charts the growth of the crisis through the erosion of teachers' self-confidence. He describes the loss of public confidence in the professions and the consequent questioning of their rights and freedoms. Professionals, he says, need to escape the morass of uncertainty, instability and value conflict they face:

*'The events which led from the triumphant professions of the early 1960s to the scepticism and unease of the 1970s and early 1980s have been at least as apparent to the professionals as to the general public. But the sense of confusion and unease which is discernible among leading professionals has an additional source. Professionals have been disturbed to find that they cannot account for processes they have come to see as central to professional competence'* (Schön 1983:19).

Schön's point was that 'professionals' cannot explain or justify and therefore do not understand what they are doing. So what Schön is identifying is a problem that arose in our own 'professional knowledge' – our meta-cognition of what we do, how we do it, and more importantly why we do it. As a consequence professionals don't trust themselves and government doesn't trust professionals. This leads to a total erosion of our authority. Hence the next question that begs itself, is how did we come to lose knowledge of ourselves and our 'metier'? And how do we regain it?

### **Lost and Found**

We may have enjoyed a golden age once, particularly in the post-war era, when the notion of professionalism was exemplified by a teacher's independence and autonomy. Their teaching methodology, their relation to students and their judgements as far as assessment and examination were concerned, were all their responsibility. The demarcation lines between government involvement and the profession's autonomy were famously drawn by George Tomlinson, then minister for education. Blunt and working class (from the Bolton area), he made it clear that the government would not exercise direct control over the curriculum, allegedly declaring that 'Minister knows nowt about curriculum'.

Yet within a few years reasons successive governments of all hues sought to exert increasing control over education. From Callaghan's Ruskin speech where he laid the blame for slow economic development at teachers' door, to Thatcher's New Right schizophrenic policies, curtailing local autonomy whilst strengthening central control, to Blair's Third Way, education and teachers increasingly became the focus of politicians' ire and at the same time becoming the instrument of choice for social engineering. The legacy of this was an endless churn of policy initiatives leading to a morass of managerialist and bureaucratic practices in our colleges that stripped FE teachers of status and autonomy. And the tragedy of the situation is the tacit acceptance of teachers of that status quo. Sure some of them do continue to subvert and sneak out and dance, but for the large majority, especially of new entrants to the profession, this is the only reality they know. It's not always the king standing guard at the locked door; most times it is fellow prisoners enforcing the curfew.

So how did we come to buy into our own incarceration? We cannot lay the blame solely on the politicians without recognising the extent of contemporary seismic political change in society. What underlies the current crisis is a political and social shift in our attitude to knowledge. The recent past has witnessed a concerted attack on knowledge as a value and on education for its own sake (Young 2012). As the social and economic aims of education replaced knowledge, it invariably led to the dismantling of teachers' authority and expertise, not least because of the teachers' own tacit acceptance of that loss.

The authority that FE teachers have lost is one that emanates from their mastery of two key aspects of their work, epistemology and pedagogy, the supremacy of knowledge and the centrality of teaching. And it is both we have lost.

The attack on both knowledge and how we teach it has come in a much more dangerous way than technology and the internet. It is primarily social, and political. The social aspects of the erosion of both society's and teachers' authority was clearly articulated by Hannah Arendt in her seminal essay 'The Crisis in Education' first published in 1954. Arendt links authority to responsibility; in her case the responsibility of the educator is to represent the public wider world to students: "*The teacher's qualification consists in knowing the world and being able to instruct others about it, but his authority rests on his assumption of responsibility for that world.*" (Arendt, 1954). It is that grounding in epistemology, expert knowledge of one's subject and discipline, coupled with pedagogy, the teacher's expertise in ushering the students into that knowledge that gives teachers their authority.

The best way of understanding this is to look at a philosophical distinction between being 'AN' authority and being 'IN' authority. This was always a complex distinction and usually a professional was both IN authority and AN authority. There is now a complete separation between the two and FE teachers in particular are now seen and often are IN authority without being AN authority.

The point of the distinction is epistemological. Being a professional and AN authority meant that you had knowledge (and skills and perhaps a code of ethics) that justified you having a job and being seen by people as an authority which is taken on trust. An authority knows something and that is the basis of trust.

A society that exhibits trust in those that know overcomes individual limitations we can't all know everything. Or to put it differently trust in the authority and knowledge of professionals makes possible a cultural milieu '*beyond the powers and capacities of any individual*' (David R Bell 'Authority'). In short, real empowerment of individual students does not come from endless directives on raising self-esteem and the centrality of the students' voice, but from investing trust in

the authoritative knowledge of teachers. As Paulo Freire remarks in a lengthy exchange with Myles Horton:

'I also discovered another thing that was very important to me afterward, that I had authority but I was not authoritarian. I began to understand at a very young age that on one hand the teacher as a teacher is not the student. The student as the student is not the teacher. I began to perceive that they are different but not necessarily antagonistic. The difference is precisely that the teacher has to teach, to experience, to demonstrate authority and the student has to experience freedom in relation to the teacher's authority. I began to see that the authority of the teacher is absolutely necessary for the development of the freedom of the students' (Bell, Caventa & Peters 1990)

In giving up this authority two new forms of professionalism have emerged: regulatory and therapeutic. The former prescribed mainly by agents of government such as Ofsted and managers, and characterised by a demand for total uncritical compliance, and the second promoted by social constructivist approach that has gone too far, reducing the teacher to a mere facilitator at best and a perpetual learner at worst, perpetually anxious, self-doubting and lacking in professional confidence.

The professional teacher-student relationship that Freire saw as empowering to the student through the teacher's authority has been redefined as a therapeutic one. Therapy culture has replaced the culture of knowledge. At times the teacher is cast as the therapist, with the 'victim' being the student lacking in confidence, self esteem, or only able to learn in one diminished 'learning style'. At other times it is the teacher who is the 'victim' of self-inflicted incompetence and self-doubt and needing the therapeutic intervention of perpetual self-reflection on their own shortcomings.

I have seen it myself in teacher education where we have insisted trainees engage in almost constant self-flagellation and teaching sessions descend into therapeutic forms of 'facilitation' so they become more like primary school 'circle time'. Teaching becomes more like counselling sessions than examinations and explorations and rigorous challenge of student teachers' knowledge. In one particular instance when I challenged a trainee's sociological knowledge, one of the other student remonstrated with me because I had 'attacked' her colleague. I pointed out that questioning the accuracy and efficacy of subject knowledge is not a personal attack, but an integral aspect of learning to become a teacher.

Therapeutic Professionalism and Regulatory Professionalism are not contradictory. Together they bestow on us a veneer of authority of a spurious kind. No longer in charge of our students' minds, we are reduced to being only responsible for their emotions and well-being, and we are held to

account through endless bureaucratic processes, where our professionalism lies in responsibility for numerical rather than intellectual growth.

### **Beyond professionalism**

So can we reclaim Professionalism? Maybe this is the wrong question to ask. In 'The Rise of Professionalism: A Sociological Analysis' Larson suggests that we need to replace the old notions of professionalism as they are obscuring our reality.

*'The conditions of professional work have changed so that the predominant pattern is no longer that of the free practitioner in a market of services, but that of the salaried specialist in a large organization. In this age of corporate capitalism, the model of profession nevertheless retains its vigor; it is still something to be defended or something to be obtained by occupations in a different historical context, in radically different work settings, and in radically altered forms of practice. The persistence of profession as a category of social practice suggests that the model constituted by the first movements of professionalism has become an ideology -- not only an image which consciously inspires collective or individual efforts, but a mystification which unconsciously obscures real social structures and relations.'*

In other words, we cannot pretend that a model that applied 100 years ago still applies today. So the question is not can we reclaim our profession, but can we reconstruct it? My solution is that we need to go out of control. It is time to move from subversion to revolution. To rebuild anything that might be called professionalism it is essential to throw out old notions and define with new ones. There is no point in asking permission or trying to reform existing bodies.

In refashioning our professionalism there are three core elements we must reclaim.

We must reclaim our expertise in pedagogy. We are the keepers of the secret chalice of knowledge, not Ofsted, not politicians, and certainly not students. To use another example from mythology, pedagogy is Samson's hair. In our pedagogical knowledge lays the authority and professional core of being a teacher. By giving it away, even if we think we're doing so in a subversive way, we give away all claims to our independence and professionalism. And that knowledge is not just theoretical. It is the knowledge at the core of life. Whatever our discipline, whether we are teaching calculus or car maintenance, we are the authority on our subject. We must be the font of all subject knowledge for our students.

We must reclaim our authority both in the classroom and beyond by reclaiming our autonomy.

Autonomy in this case is not an individual teacher's right to do as they please, but rather a

professional autonomy, based on our pedagogical authority individually and collectively as a community of knowledge. Reclaiming the authority of the teacher can only happen when we reclaim the autonomy of the collective and that in turns supports the autonomy of the individual professional.

We must reclaim education as a discipline. Teachers are made, and we are made through a process that initiates us into the discipline that is education. We need to reclaim teacher education as the intellectual discipline that it should be. Not the insipid training to jump through competency and 'standards' hoops coupled with the exhortation to self-flagellate on a regular basis (the one called professional reflection), but the initiation into the philosophy, sociology, psychology and history of education that are the foundations on which our new professional temple is to be built.

The choice is ours and it is stark. We can become autonomous, authoritative professionals or continue to be led by the nose. Break down the door and tell the king in no uncertain terms not just that we will dance but that we are the composers and the choreographers of the music and the dance.

And if we must use metaphors then allow me my own metaphor for Further Education. It is not that of the hapless or even subversive princess. If Further Education is anything it is the fairy godmother. The one who waves the magic wand and gives everyone a second chance: the sixteen year old who left school disillusioned; the twenty something forging ahead in a new vocation; the mid-thirties learner who needs to update their qualification; the person in their forties changing careers. Further Education makes it all possible. It is Further Education who is the saviour of the nation especially as half the nation's teenagers still leave secondary school without the prerequisite GCSEs to progress.

The twelve princesses may have been dancing secretly for years, with Further Education teachers publicly acquiescing to being locked in within policy and managerial confines, while persisting in doing their 'own thing' surreptitiously, but this clandestine dancing must come to an end. It is high time the princesses defy the king, own up to their subversive activity and out themselves as the great dancers they are. It is time we restore our autonomy and voice, rather than persisting in living this double life that is keeping us under the metaphorical lock and key, and eroding our professionalism. The king will never allow the princesses out to dance and we need to stop waiting for his permission. It's gone past the time of subversion. It's high time for revolution.

It is time to take over the castle!

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