

Neglected spaces. Exploring connections between physical settings and pedagogic enablement and constraint of HE teachers in an FE college

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Abstract

This paper presents a summary of selected findings from a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) study exploring higher education (HE) teacher pedagogic practice enactments of six College Based Higher Education (CBHE) teacher participants in a UK FE land-based college. A CGT approach was used as it is advocated as being a useful approach to adopt when exploring a neglected and under-theorised area, such as post-compulsory education pedagogic practice. Following a ‘hunch’ regarding the potential influence of an FE environment upon CBHE teacher HE pedagogic practice enactment, the CGT methodology was informed by Schatzki’s anti-dualist social philosophy of the site ontology. The site ontology contends people, places and material objects all contribute to how pedagogic practices are enacted. Rather than considering material artefacts to be merely background objects and college buildings simply being inert containers where teaching takes place, a site ontology considers material, non-human artefacts and human practices as a whole, rather than from one or other side of the structure versus agency divide. As such, a site has ‘powers of determination’ regarding how individuals are able to enact their practice and develop their identity within a specific site. The study was situated within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative, ethnographic methodology ‘to understand phenomena in context-specific settings’ (Hoepfl 1997, 47). Multiple empirical teaching observations and interview data from animal, equine and veterinary nursing CBHE teachers indicated how the physical, symbolic and material, non-human spaces and artefacts of the FE context did impact upon HE classroom pedagogic practice enactment, by prefiguring and constraining their HE pedagogic practice. Participants reported how the FE context and taken for granted existing conditions at the site limited their extent to which they were able to enact their HE practices and develop HE teacher identities. This paper highlights some of the challenges of offering HE within an FE college, and invites FE college leaders to consider the impact of the FE context upon HE teachers’ HE pedagogic practice enactment and HE teacher identity.

Keywords: College Based Higher Education (CBHE); site ontology; pedagogic practices; teacher identity

Introduction, research approach and context

Unlike sectors of UK education, e.g. primary and secondary, where studies concerning teacher pedagogic practices abound, College Based Higher Education (CBHE) remains comparatively under-researched and neglected. CBHE ‘refers to all those activi-

ties that relate to the management, development, delivery and assessment of higher education qualifications and programmes taught in further education colleges' (Greenwood, 2010, p.1), and is unique in that, whilst situated in FE, it straddles both FE and HE and is inevitably subject to, and influenced by policies and practices from both sectors.

Whilst not attempting to characterise CBHE using too broad terms, it is typically described as vocational, focused upon sub-degree provision e.g. Foundation Degrees, often with small classes (compared to university HE), with students predominantly from working-class socio-economic backgrounds drawn from local areas (Tummons and Ingleby, 2014), often with teachers without research degrees, and usually operating via a collaborative arrangement with a partner university. Kumari (2017) suggests CBHE teachers have higher teaching hours, usually teach both FE and HE, and are more orientated towards scholarly activity and employer engagement, rather than towards research as typically conceived of by the university sector.

Despite 10 per cent of UK students studying HE in an FE college (ibid.), few in-depth, micro-level studies have explored what CBHE teachers actually *do* in their HE classrooms. Arguably none have been carried out to explore the impact of an FE college setting upon the ways in which HE teachers enact their HE pedagogies. It is this specific aspect e.g. the physical and cultural college setting (site), that this paper discusses.

The study was situated within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm using a qualitative, ethnographic methodology 'to understand phenomena in context-specific settings' (Hoepfl, 1997, p.47). As a teacher with CBHE teaching experience, I followed a personal 'hunch' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Bluff, 2005; Charmaz, 2006) regarding the potential influence of an FE environment upon CBHE teacher HE pedagogic practice enactment and HE teacher identity development e.g. impacts such as Ofsted, having 14-16 year old students on campus, an FE managerialist culture etc.

The study was framed around a central research question:

When teaching HE, what do these HE in FE teachers do, how do they do it, and why?

Findings were interpreted and framed using Schatzki's Site Ontology and a Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) approach. The Site Ontology offered a more holistic view of considering pedagogic practice as being comprised of individuals *and* the specific context within which they operate. Brennan-Kemmis and Green (2013) remark how a site-specific lens is 'relevant to any discussion of ... pedagogy since it provides both a retrospective and prospective framework for analysing and understanding the factors that influence the work of teachers, and by definition their pedagogies' (p.109). Given the exploratory nature of the study, and the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm within which the study was situated, an hypothetico-deductive research approach was not considered to be methodologically congruent. A CGT was selected because of its philosophical alignment with an constructivist/interpretivist paradigm. Predicated upon creating new theoretical understandings from empirical field data, rather than as a result of hypothesis testing using existing theories, it uses deductive approaches. CGT relies upon induction to follow emergent leads from research participants and theoretical or thematic leads grounded in the empirical data (Charmaz, 2006). A substantive theory to theoretically best account for the 'what', 'how' and 'why' of HE teacher pedagogic practice enactments was co-constructed with the research participants. As is usual with grounded theory (GT) studies, an initial 'hunch' (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1984; Bluff, 2005, Charmaz, 2006) based upon the researcher's 'lived experience', from anecdotal evidence that the researcher has

about the field of enquiry (Urquhart et al., 2010, p.367) was used to provide broad framing of the study and ‘points of departure from which to study the data’ (Charmaz, 2003, p.259). Data sampling, analysis and collection occurred concurrently and sign-posted where to go and what to ask in subsequent data collection rounds (Holton, 2008). Empirical data was subjected to interpretivist analysis using iterative cycles of coding, memoing and theoretical sampling associated with GT. The analysis included the construction of categories whereby the data was organised around coherent themes.

Drawing on empirical ethnographic data (multiple site walks, FE and HE teaching observations and interviews) gathered from 6 animal, equine and veterinary nursing teachers (pseudonyms were used) within a small UK landbased FE college, this paper presents an overview of some of the key findings regarding the influence of the physical and cultural setting of the FE college in prefiguring the ways in which the teacher participants enacted their HE pedagogic practices. As well as outlining some of these influences and resultant challenges to the teachers, the paper proposes some recommendations for college leaders to consider in order to mitigate against the challenges presented.

A brief sketch of Schatzki’s Site Ontology

The site ontology contends people, places and material objects all contribute to how pedagogic practices are enacted. Rather than considering material artefacts to be merely background objects and college buildings simply being inert containers where teaching takes place, a site ontology considers material, non-human artefacts and human practices as a whole, rather than from one or other side of the structure versus agency divide. As such, a site has ‘powers of determination’ (Schatzki, 2005, p.468) regarding how individuals are able to enact their practice within a specific site.

Within this specific contextual framing, non-human, material aspects and physical artefacts are considered as being intimately involved in the ways in which teachers enact their pedagogic practices within the classroom. As such, the act of teaching is not an individual property of teachers (McGregor, 2004); rather it is pedagogy that is characterised as the specific context where the teaching takes place and the non-human material artefacts and technologies, which comprise it. Examples of these non-human material artefacts within an educational setting can include whiteboards, classroom PCs and projectors, books and teaching resources/equipment, signage and wall art.

Schatzki’s site ontology proposes how a physical place or context (such as an FE classroom or an FE college) is not external to the ways in which individual teachers enact their practices within it; rather is is inherently tied up with it. Significantly, a site ontology maintains that physical spaces and material artefacts can serve to orchestrate and perpetuate the ways in which social order and social norms (including sanctioning what can and cannot be done or said) can be prefigured, perpetuated and normalised within a particular setting (Röhl, 2015). An example might be of a classroom arranged with fixed, raked seating and a board and lectern at the front. The position of such non-human artefacts can prefigure where a teacher might stand or sit, how they might interact with the class and how learners might interact with their peers. Therefore, an empty room and the way it is arranged can act, to some extent, as a primer for prefiguring the teaching and learning practices which occur, ‘even before a particular practitioner arrives on the scene’ (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008, p.55). Thus, whilst individuals perform enacted practices, the ways in which they are organised and pre-

figured is not attributed solely to individuals, but to the site where such practices are played out (Hopwood, 2014). This shaping of practices, i.e. enablement or constraint within a context is known as prefiguration, and is developed over time. Thus, for those within a particular site, meaning given to particular practices is as a result of a gradual layering of social interaction over time (Lloyd, 2010), creating both meaning to practice, as well as defining limits of acceptability.

Schatzki suggests pedagogic practices in a particular site are ‘centrally organised round shared practical understanding’ (Schatzki, 2001, p.2), and are understood as a ‘nexus of doings and sayings’ predicated on shared understandings, rules, and goals (Schatzki, 1997, p.3). Such sayings and doings will be specific to a site and can legitimise certain practices over another. Thus when considered in concert with the physical buildings and the non-human artefacts within it, the site is far more than an inert backdrop or location where teaching practices merely happen to take place; it is a ‘setting or backdrop that envelops and determines phenomena’ (Schatzki, 2000, xiv).

Findings

Following CGT constant comparison and coding principles, data was constructed into four conceptual categories (Figure 1). This paper will focus only on ‘Just like school’, as this was the category that was concerned with the college as a ‘site’ e.g. where the impact of the FE physical and cultural setting upon HE teacher practice and identity was discussed by the 6 participants.

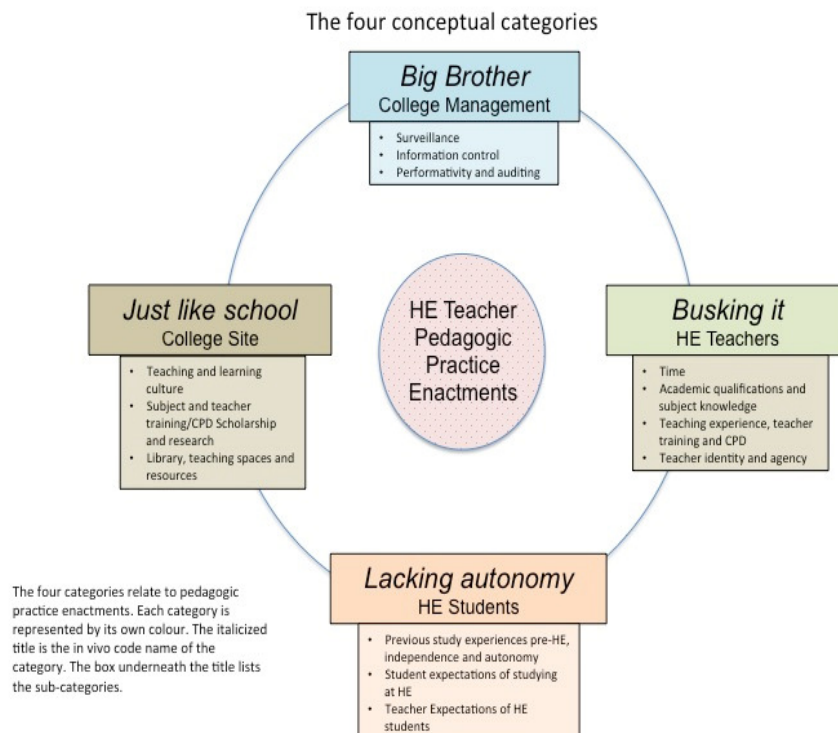


Figure 1. The Four Conceptual Categories

Just like school

The category presented the college as a site; a place in which there were established norms and traditions for understanding and enacting teaching practices. This included the physical, material and non-human symbols and artefacts at the college and considered the college as a physical entity and space in which the HE teachers enacted their HE practice. Not as an inert container, rather a specific milieu where the HE teachers co-existed both with their FE teacher colleagues and everyone and everything else; be it human and non-human. Further facets of the site included the ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ and semantic norms which characterised taken for granted, shared understandings of what could be said and done regarding teaching within the college.

Participant narratives suggested how the site contributed to ways in which they enacted their HE pedagogic practices. Prefiguration of HE pedagogic practice enactment was influenced strongly by taken for granted and shared practical understandings of what constituted ‘good’ or ‘correct’ teaching at the college. The prevalence of FE spaces, symbols and artefacts were all reported by participants as impacting negatively upon both their HE pedagogies and their ability to construct an authentic HE teacher identity. With regard to the FE symbols and artefacts, and the physical context of the college, participants reported how they served to remind of the dominance of FE and the shared FE understandings amongst staff and students. As Jane explained:

“This place isn’t very inspiring. When I was a student [at university] the corridors in the teaching blocks had student and staff research posters, things about seminars and that kind of thing. That made me feel like I was part of a *proper* place of learning [italics for emphasis]. Professor Smith from the institute of whatever coming to do a talk. We have posters up about dog agility and pony club rallies. It’s not quite the same is it? [laughs]. It was so different from what I had seen at school. But here it’s not like that. It reminds me of school. We have posters about safeguarding, how to ring Childline and behaviour rules in the classrooms about no teasing and being nice to each other. It feels like a school. I am not sure it’s the right place for it really [HE]. It’s hard to pin it down but I don’t feel like it’s good. It doesn’t make me feel like ‘right, now I am doing HE, it’s different’. I think it should be that. It should feel different? I think we need separate places. Not being here with loads of loud 16 year olds. I am forever going out and shouting at them to shut up. It makes me feel like a school teacher”

Alison expressed similar views about the college as a physical and material space within which to teach HE:

“They [library staff] are helpful and they do try. But the library isn’t really up to much. I mean, look at it. It’s tiny and there are only a few tables to sit and work at. Not that you can work because it’s so noisy. They [library staff] do try and police it a bit and keep the noise down, but it’s hard. I don’t bring my HE students here. There’s no point”

Finally, Pat voiced similar concerns regarding the physical space and buildings and how they impacted upon her HE practice:

“It’s hard to *feel* [italics for emphasis] different like a proper HE person, doing lectures and things when the place is *so* [italics for emphasis] FE. It’s hard. The reminders of FE are all around. You know, hearing students shrieking through the wall, and classrooms are in a state and things on the walls are dodgy bits of FE artwork [laughs]. But seriously it’s not helpful. I feel I need, I dunno somewhere more, hmm, like a place where we can escape all that. Somewhere quiet, more grown up I suppose. Cleaner, professional. To make it more like an atmosphere for learning. I think it’s hard for me to feel different.”

With regard to notions of ‘good’ or ‘correct’ teaching at the college, participants described how there were clear, shared understandings concerning what constituted the ‘right’ way to teach. The locally understood rules and practical understandings reflected ‘the way we do things around here’ (Kemmis et al., 2014, p.67) with these understandings being ‘invisible – taken for granted as ‘the way things are’” (Kemmis and Grootenboer 2008, p.38).

Participants further commented about Ofsted and how it negatively interplayed with their HE teaching. The benchmark of Ofsted was applied equally to FE and HE with unannounced management walk throughs and the use of Ofsted lesson observation criteria for FE and HE prefiguring HE teacher practice:

“It’s universal. I think management think the Ofsted way is the best way for all teaching. It’s what the college needs to satisfy at the end of the day. Why not use it for both? [FE and HE observations] That’s them. Not me. I think HE should have its own system but I think they [management] want to make sure we all teach the same to make sure that we tick the Ofsted box... a Grade 1* observation is *the* [emphasis in italics] thing to get so for HE it has to be prepped and taught in that way, all mega structured and planned to the nth degree. If you did go a bit off piste in a discussion or something or deviated from the plan it probably would not be good. Everyone has it drummed into them that lessons need to be ‘Ofsted perfect’ if you want to get on” (Caroline)

* Data collected just prior to announcement May 2015 that graded lesson observations would no longer be used in Ofsted inspections for FE colleges from September 2015 (Morrison, 2015)

Similarly, Pat commented:

“The bottom line is that the way this place runs is about teaching, teaching, teaching. It’s all the same. No-one differentiates between HE or FE. Everyone teaches FE so that’s what we all know. Everyone knows about the awarding bodies and how FE works. But HE is hardly done by anyone so no-one really appreciates that it’s different and needs a different way of organising it. It’s in a minority. I feel a bit like that too”

These accepted ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ were communicated through the universal language of FE, and this was what all staff had fluency of, and familiarity with. The ubiquity of the FE discourse served to propagate and preserve taken-for-granted norms and values. The site was bound up with historicism; the college had been running FE since it started over forty five years previously. In contrast, HE was a fledgling enterprise, which was restricted to only a minority of teachers and students. Participants had strongly voiced concerns regarding the college FE culture and its ability to accommodate a different, i.e. HE culture. They felt HE was different to FE and

needed to be approached and managed otherwise. In contrast, they felt that the management did not necessarily practically support this view. The participants admitted to considering Ofsted when planning HE teaching, largely as a result of the shared understanding across the college regarding the importance of Ofsted; institutionally and individually. This often led to them assuming more teacher centered and quite didactic pedagogic approaches as they felt that the college culture was ‘just like school’ and was not considered to be supportive or conducive to them acquiring and developing an HE teacher identity. Rather than being free to teach and to empower their HE learners to challenge and to question, the HE teachers relied on less risk averse, safe teaching approaches that remained in the ‘comfort zone’ of themselves as a means of avoiding management censure.

Discussion

What the participants described illustrated how the college site was not ‘neutral or without some pre-existing form...[but] interactional spaces where the historical meets the present in activities in physical space–time’ (Edwards-Groves et al., 2016, p.323). Given the particularity of the site as an FE college with predominantly 14–18 year old students, and symbols of FE to constantly remind and reiterate the business and culture of FE, the all-encompassing and dominating FE culture was manifested within the physical site. Posters, signage and imagery all served to reinforce the FE culture of the site to those within in it. The profusion of FE symbols and artefacts served to perpetuate the collective agreements and understandings between individuals within the site. Even the presence of exterior signage with ‘FE’ on it immediately created perceptions about the particular meaning and function of the physical setting (Elsbach and Pratt, 2007). In turn, this gave no symbolic reference to the existence of culture and practices outside of FE.

The omnipresent symbols and artefacts of FE, e.g. classroom rules, anti-bullying posters and Childline contact information, as well as the often crudely drawn assessment artefacts on classroom walls served as a ‘persistent and repetitive’ reminder (Proshansky et al., 1983, p.64) of the college being an FE institution. The strongly historicised and sedimented discourses and practices of FE sustained the FE institutional culture and teacher FE identities, as well as serving to legitimise and privilege dominant FE practices. The material artefacts and taken for granted ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ at the college contributed to prefiguring how HE teachers viewed themselves, and how they enacted their HE teaching practices (Caronia and Mortari, 2015). The FE signs, symbols and artefacts conveyed a clear message which ‘objectified norms and the assumptions on how work should be carried out, and the purposes of use’ (Nicolini 2009, p.1406).

This left the CBHE teachers in an unsatisfactory position with a tenuous and uncertain HE identity, largely constructed without the requisite ‘symbolic and affective associations’ of HE (Proshansky et al. 1983, p.68). Practices contain ‘historical traces of past educational practices that pertain in particular sites (such as the teaching and learning approaches in particular classrooms at a school or at university)’ (Edwards-Groves 2014, p.152). Kemmis (2008) suggests how practices can lose fluidity. As a result of becoming ‘sedimented and institutionalised they [then] function as mediating preconditions for subsequent practice ... preconditions that pre-form what kinds of practice will be possible’ (p.25).

Concluding comments

The central research question: *When teaching HE, what do these HE in FE teachers do, how do they do it, and why?*, was used to frame the study. Following ‘points of departure’ and emergent leads from the participants (as advocated by a CGT approach), rounds of iterative GT coding/memoing, interpretation of empirical data and subsequent integration with existing theory, the study revealed how being an HE teacher within an FE site did create challenges in terms of pedagogic enactment and HE teacher identity formation. The FE site did constrain HE pedagogic practice by virtue of the highly sedimented and taken for granted FE norms and practices and the sanctioned ‘sayings and doings’, which all revolved around FE. The FE artefacts and physical environment reinforced the FE purpose and culture, orchestrating and perpetuating FE practices. The absence of physical or intersubjective spaces for HE to proliferate affected teacher agency and HE identity formation.

Recommendations

In keeping with Schatzkian notions of the site, a consideration of the provision of physical spaces, resources and artefacts which would help both HE teachers (and indeed HE learners) to assume and develop an HE identity is advocated. HEness (Lea and Simmons, 2012) and ‘feeling’ like an HE teacher (and learner) is connected to physical and symbolic artefacts within a site. This includes common rooms, classrooms, teacher offices, library and study areas and social spaces. By providing HE-specific spaces for teachers and learners, the material impacts of FE physical and symbolic artefacts could be mitigated. Affording opportunities for teachers to develop themselves as HE teachers is essential, but this would need to be considered within the specific context of the college as a site, and should include how an HE teacher identity can be supported and developed for teachers with a dual role of being both an HE and an FE teacher within a multiple-selves context; a context which typically requires co-existing in shared spaces with colleagues and students who are exclusively FE and who are not involved in HE.

This study also illustrated the influence of Ofsted and classroom observations upon the ways in which teachers enacted their HE pedagogic practices. Observations using Ofsted criteria for HE caused anxiety for teachers and reduced the observation process to that of a one-way audit and measurement exercise. To counter negative influences upon HE pedagogic practice enactment, the introduction of peer review for HE teaching is advocated. Whilst it is used in some FECs for HE teaching, it is usually restricted to larger colleges and is not widespread across the CBHE sector. Therefore, and in concert with the rest of the HE sector, using peer review rather than Ofsted criteria for HE observations would remove punitive aspects and give HE teachers greater freedom to express themselves and their agency as HE teachers. This is not to disregard Ofsted or its role in their FE teacher lives, but it would serve to empower HE teachers to have the courage and confidence to be able to enact different pedagogic approaches in their HE classes. Only when CBHE teachers are trained, supported and developed and the physical environment and artefacts considered, might positive changes begin and proliferate.

Conclusion

By adopting an anti-dualist, site based approach to exploring CBHE teacher practice the ‘blindness toward the question of how educational practice is affected by materials’ (Sørensen, 2009, p.2) was not ignored; rather it was considered as being integral to the ways in which practice was enacted. The site-based approach provided a sense of an awareness and acuity towards the site in terms of people, place and things by considering the college as being more than an inert backdrop. The study indicated how FE cast long shadows over HE provision at the college, and how material, non-human artefacts and physical spaces that were strongly associated with FE did appear to influence HE practice. Teacher practice was not an individual pursuit, but one, which was an accomplishment achieved within socially and materially intersubjective spaces; an accomplishment that was strongly prefigured by shared practical understandings, thereby defining limits of acceptability.

The presence of material, non-human artefacts and physical spaces that are strongly associated with FE, and the absence of dedicated HE spaces and HE teachers, has the potential to constrain HE practices. As such, colleges with little or no dedicated HE spaces, few HE artefacts, few HE symbols and no dedicated HE teachers may well find establishing and sustaining HE practices a challenge. This challenge may be exacerbated by the FE ‘sayings’ which provide semantic discourse boundaries of what is, or is not acceptable, and FE ‘doings’ which may be in the form of sedimented, shared practical understandings about how ‘good’ teaching practices should be enacted.

An exploration framed within a site ontology has highlighted how non-human, material things and spaces matter, because of their ability to ‘generate[s] consequences for how we experience and act in our world’ (Carlile et al., 2013, p.3). Further, material objects ‘make practices durable and connect practices with each other across space and time’ (Nicolini, 2012, p.4), thereby serving as strong elements in prefiguring and reproducing how practices are enacted within a particular site. With regard to sanctioning what can legitimately be said or done, a site ontology illustrates how taken for granted ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ can prefigure ‘what people do, where they do it, with whom and for what purpose’ (ibid., p.6). This paper concludes by suggesting that FE colleges with HE provision consider the more holistic position from which a site ontology is situated as a means of exploring HE provision within their own institution. By assuming a site ontology perspective, only then can the potential of material things and ‘sayings’ and ‘doings’ to ‘exclude, invite, and order particular forms of participation in enactments’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2013, p.53) be unearthed and understood.

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