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## **The Cost of Everything and the Value of Nothing: what's next for the FE sector?**

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### **Key words**

Transformation, empowerment, policy actors, pedagogy, teacher education, professional development, petrification, good help, diffraction, anti-heroic leadership.

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, we sketch out the here-and-now and suggest possible futures for post-compulsory education and training (PCET), whilst exploring our confliction with the label itself. We then offer a number of different trajectories of thought and warning against inertia. The chapter will end with our vision of how a healthy, empowering 'FE' can be achieved.

### **To FE or not? A Note from the Authors**

During the process of writing this chapter, we kept snagging on the acronym PCET. As a term generally used to describe post-school non-university education it lacks logic and consistency: one of us is based in Scotland and one in England, after all. But it was more than that. The critical question is: who defines what is compulsory? The answer encapsulated all that we are going to write about here: 'PCET' has education's problems inscribed in its DNA. As our writing tied itself into a Gordian knot, we were compelled to address this tension.

The education which takes place for people when they leave school, whether freely chosen or mandated, yet occurs outside of a university's higher education programme, is called many things by many people, sometimes mindlessly and other times intentionally, for ideological purposes. Our purpose here was to avoid introducing yet another term to the mix, so we have chosen to use the relatively least unburdened, in our view. We will refer throughout this chapter to FE, or further education.

## **1. Challenging Assumptions**

### **Critical Question:**

*How does the language we use about FE shape the way we think?*

Identity and definition have dominated the discourse of FE over the last 20 years. Much has been made of the 'Cinderella sector' lost in its self-proclaimed crisis of definition; weighed down by an inability to coalesce, to form a consistent and ripple-free identity across all its manifestations (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015). The notion that FE has been experiencing an extended identity crisis has been the subject of literature over two decades (see, for example, Elliot (1996), Simmons (2010)) and those internalised messages play out in tensions and paradoxes: the 'wicked problems' faced by the sector, which endless rounds of

thinking attempt to solve (Peters, 2017). To complicate matters of identity further, FE is all-too-often defined in economic, rather than educational terms, leading to tense 'living contradictions' in working practice for all those involved (Illsley and Waller, 2017): the mission statement vs the bottom line.

We are interested in challenging the notion that FE lacks a comprehensible identity. Our work affords us the privilege of speaking with those working in FE, across its diverse subjects, vocations and curricula and we observe no lack of purpose in pedagogical encounters. Could it be that FE actually does know itself, or at least it could do if it began to define its own fate? We argue that FE has a definition no more difficult to grasp than that of any other education sector (Husband, 2018). What it does lack is an audible and coherent voice.

For too long, we in FE have failed to challenge the ideology of successive governments: that education is primarily a means to a country's economic growth. Of course, Paulo Freire famously advocated engaging with the dominant discourse but as Mayo (2009) explores, thanks to the inane 'public pedagogy' of mainstream news media, engagement is there but criticality is lacking. FE parrots the lexicon of advanced capitalism in pursuit of survival and falls into the trap of pigeonholing, culturally inhibiting and limiting itself (Simmons, 2010). The act of creating an identity limited to skills and economic development ensures FE remains within those constraints, as policy focused funding creates a pervasive view of what is important. If FE is defined by a single purpose of providing human capital for a growth economy, that is all that it is allowed to be.

In the current UK (and wider) political climate, a landscape referred to by Avis (2018) as 'the fourth industrial revolution', the language of 'progress' has shifted any discussion away from value and towards cost and worth. Contemporary political debates are fought on economic terms: trade deals, currency value, cost of manufacture, the expense of migrating populations and the cumulative perceived strain on the finances of the fifth largest economy in the world. This pervasive ideology of value in terms of 'economics-only' filters through all avenues of public life and becomes internalised in synonyms for FE such as 'the skills system' (NUS, 2017). Where we once held a socially cohesive view of community and afforded a welfare state we now think in terms of national cost and not national value. Where we once valued education as a universal right, it is now in the bailiwick of employers – the net producers of economic worth, with little funding or attention given to programmes of study which do not directly lead to 'employability' (see, for example, Crisp and Powell, 2016). Preparing people for work and an economically productive life has always been one element of learning; now it is the sole driving focus of measure, playing out in every aspect of FE: from 'revolving door' recruitment policies (Atkins, 2009) to a perfectionist culture of individual competence monitoring (Boreham, 2010). Organisations grab hold of the latest jargon, believing they need it to escape negative scrutiny - and unwittingly reinforce its hold on collective thinking.

FE's complexity is that it contains multiple identities within one collectively defined sector, dominated by the interests of its strongest and most articulate voice: general further education colleges, powerfully organised as the Association of Colleges (AoC). Other FE contexts are defined by what they are not: for example 'non-traditional' is an unhelpful term

for prison education which is actually older (more 'traditional') than college-based FE (Coates, 2016).

The common assumption that further education is everything not done by universities or schools is inaccurate; the 'post-compulsory' learning trajectories of individuals are not always straightforward. FE has unhelpfully internalised some disempowering messages: the Cinderella in the head (Mycroft, 2019). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that the language we use shapes the way we think and vice versa (Boroditsky, 2010) may have been popularised into soundbites (McWhorter, 2014) but their notion of 'linguistic relativity' offers a helpful critique of how political and ideological levers leak into the ecosystems of education and other social policy, influencing structures and practice. FE has a confused and contradictory lexicon, paradoxically combining the use of impenetrable jargon with ill-defined terms clinging on from a different world, leading to an inability to articulate its purpose with any clarity. This liminality leads to a culture of 'groupthink' where the absurd becomes normal and pedagogy - the theory and practice of teaching which should be at the heart of any discourse - is reduced to a set of capitalised policy soundbites: Resilience, Growth Mindset, Wellbeing, Attainment Gap. A re-think – or re-imagining – of FE and its discourses is well overdue.

Instead of worrying about how to define what FE is and does, let's consider how we achieve what society needs from the sector, drawing on FE's multiple identities and cultures to support the notion of education for all. In this respect, the identity and purpose of FE are inextricably linked and quite clear: **further education should promote and support transitions of individuals through learning**. That is all the definition that is required in order to understand the ethos of the sector.

Vocabulary is key. Defining the FE sector by what it 'delivers' pushes us towards a mindset of outputs, attainment and economic viability. The lexicon of capitalism is an ill fit for what education can potentially achieve and shapes not only how we think and view others, but also the organisational structures which constrain us. Within organisations, inequality is rife: in top-heavy structures stacked high with 'bullshit jobs' (Graeber, 2018) and in the precarity of some contracts vs the pension-protected security of others. Leadership and 'line management' become entangled and line management, with its human resources weaponry, plays it safe. Risk aversion is everywhere, in thrall to the perfectionist demands of Ofsted (O'Leary, 2016). As O'Leary argues, all this 'management' constrains the agency of the teaching profession. It is therefore worth taking a fresh look at four of the terms we take for granted.

#### *1. What do we call FE?*

The term 'post-compulsory' signals conflicting things in different parts of the UK - the 'school' leaving age of 18 in England does not apply in Scotland, for example, meaning that the term has a different meaning north and south of the border. Further education's 'training and skills' suffix was an ideological move, signalling a shift to the employability agenda (McMurray, 2019) around the same time that 'teaching, learning and assessment' shifted emphasis from what the teacher did to what the student learned (that could be measured and monitored) (Coffield, 2014). Slippery terms are unhelpful and do nothing to enable effective discourse, particularly across contexts, disciplines and other silos. As we have

explored above, it is difficult enough to get hold of an agreed definition of 'further education/FE', which is all we choose to grapple with here.

## 2. 'Non-traditional' contexts

Within or outside of FE, an assumption exists that general further education colleges are the *sine qua non* manifestation of FE and other sites - community education, private training and work-based learning, sixth forms (lumped in with schools), third sector provision, the growing educational portfolio in the criminal justice system - are additional. Again we see the powerful relationship between language and structures of power, with the Association of Colleges having more significant clout than other sector bodies (in England); thus amplifying the voice of the most powerful partner. Understandable and worked hard for, yet this begs the question of how to assure that level of representation for all.

## 3. Lifelong Learning

As things stand, both in England and Scotland, FE sits in the midst of an uncreative tension between being the saviour of the post-Brexit economy on the one hand and (the traditional narrative of) 'saving' lost souls on the other. The turn-of-the-century adult education lexicon, which culminated in the short-lived repositioning of FE/adult education as 'lifelong learning' (Blunkett, 1990) survives in the form of Festival of Learning award winners and the like. FE writes the tragic life story genre brilliantly; what it lacks is a language to articulate those pedagogies that contribute to the transformation of the few.

## 4. (My) learners

When did students get to be called 'learners' in FE parlance? The concept of lifelong learning may be at the heart of this, but it is hard to pin down. It seems likely that 'learner' arose during a '90s shift away from 'chalk-and-talk' teaching to the group-based learning that was popular around that time. Ironic, then, that in FE the term 'learner' has come to be shaded with an othering tone - 'them', not us or, as Kevin Orr (2018) put it: "other people's children." It is hard to resist an analysis that the overweening structural inequalities of FE find their human outlet in unequal relationships between groups of people.

These definitions are important in that they are derived from the ever-changing policy context which in itself is embedded in an economy-driven narrative of social policy. As FE becomes ever more tied into the language and outputs of capitalism, employers\* seem to be asking for something quite different to the prevailing 'everyone gets there in the end' competency-based approach: contemporary research converges on 'deeper' skills and behaviours, such as autonomy, digital agility, teamwork and problem solving (Pellegrino and Hilton, 2012 and much more, of varying quality, since). Reddy (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2017) and others (see for example Dromey, McNeil and Roberts, 2017) have demonstrated that even when aligning funding to the fulfilment of the economic mission, FE still doesn't get it right: the varying quality apprenticeships of recent years are not always fit for purpose, sending plumbers, for example, out into industry with outdated skills and little business acumen. Young people in England, compelled to stay in education to avoid being defined as 'NEET' (a label which frequently causes the family income to be reduced) are forced to endure a revolving door (Atkins, 2009) of motor vehicle technology/plumbing (for boys) and

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\* Employers' approaches to education are not beyond critique, but not for this chapter.

hairdressing/health and social care (for girls), courses that rarely lead to gainful employment as they lack the required practical real working environment experience in sufficient level and depth. There is no formal gender pipeline, just unconscious stereotyping, often by all parties. Having been comprehensively failed by the school system, expectations that FE may also fix inadequacies in maths and English are correspondingly low (Anderson and Peart, 2016).

The conduits of policy influence are not accidental; to make its case to the Treasury the Department for Education has to a) clearly understand what FE is capable of and b) take on board timely and persuasive briefings from the sector. As we have seen, the internalised nonsense around a confused identity ensures that we are collectively inarticulate (sterling recent efforts by the Association of Colleges being too little, too late). No pipeline means no visibility within a Government department which does not itself sustain FE narratives from within its ranks of sixth form to university civil servants - and only hears the 'tragic life story' message from the outside. Until it can self-define and articulate a powerful message around pedagogy and practice, FE is missing the chance to be at the vanguard of new modes and patterns of work.

As Gramsci famously wrote, 'The old is dying and the new cannot be born.' He was referring to an epoch he called 'interregnum', literally 'between kings', which he interpreted in Leninist terms as being when those with power cannot rule and those without power do not want to be ruled. The Marxist frame will endure only as long as it is frozen in a death-dance with capitalism, but the words can still be usefully repurposed into a tidy aphorism for education today. Here is the unhealthy and artificial binary of FE: apprenticeships/employability vs a 'tragic life story' therapeutic flavour to the narratives around 'transformation' (Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009; Furedi, 2009). This schizophrenic landscape, axiomatic of advanced capitalism (according to Deleuze and Guattari, 1980) leaves us with a risk-averse workforce which doubts its own judgement and has forgotten the vocabulary it needs to explicate its pedagogy and reclaim powerful ground for teaching. Our vision is a pedagogy-forward one, but first we must explore the limits of 'transformation'.

## **2. The Transformation Mirage**

### **Critical Question:**

*Who, if anyone, needs to be transformed – and how?*

Acknowledging that transformational experiences are mercurial and personal it is important to set out our definition in order to explore what we describe as the transformational mirage. Aoki (cited in Pinar and Irwin 2004) defines transformation in education as authentic learning, intervention and empowerment. These three factors, which enable distinct and profound change in an individual's perspective or circumstance, are a useful place from which to explore what is meant by transformation through education. We should be clear from the outset that we are not suggesting education isn't or cannot be transformational: on the contrary, where learners are able to fulfil their own purpose for learning - be that career or personal achievement - the impact is potentially life-changing. As teacher educators ourselves, we are humbled on a regular basis by students who harness the transformational fire of their own experience to ignite transformation in others. These stories are described glowingly by advocates as "inspirational", and the "passion" of adult educators to "make a difference" is taken for granted in our profession. Our argument is that much of this is

accidental - opportunities seized rather than practice grounded in transformative philosophies - and that the myth of the 'transformational teacher' is both patronising and contextually unachievable (see, once again, Ecclestone and Hayes, 2009). All too often these moving stories occur in spite of the education system, and not because of it. A clear and precise delineation between the *system* and *educators* is intentional here, however it is important to acknowledge that educators are within and part of the system and the problem of bifurcation is not as simple as we have implied. Despite this, it seems that some people are able to harness learning situations, make new sense of the world and interpret their histories and agency in a new light, even if this was not the explicit intention of the course: more of a happenstance. An intentional pedagogy would leave a lot less to chance.

Not everyone wants to be transformed and nor should they. FE is a broad church and some people really do 'just' want to learn a new skill. It is time to move away from the dangerous idea that education must and should be transformational and that educators are the people who make it so. This is a fallacy and a self-aggrandising one at that. Despite the claims of glossy prospectuses and outsized, outside Ofsted banners, transformation is not in the gift of the teacher, the college or the sector, nor does it follow a growth mindset (Dweck, 2017) like night follows day. Transformative experiences are supported by conditions, individuals, circumstance, openness to learning and cultural acceptance. As long as the idea that teachers can be transformational is ideologically incorporated, we remove the aspiration of emancipation away from individuals (and communities) and gateway it: furthermore, we set up educators to be measured against their supposedly transformational behaviours, perfectionist standards (Brown, 2015) that can never be met.

All of this creates a sector which sees perfection as 'normal': when did 'outstanding' stop meaning 'to stand out'? And when did good stop being good enough? (Husband 2017). FE is fuelled by gratitude: of the student towards the teacher, of the teacher towards the institution which enables them to carry out their 'vocation'. Brown's lifetime of research into shame and vulnerability (2015) points the finger at perfectionist cultures for creating unhealthy workplaces and the evidence around mental ill-health in the teaching profession is irrefutable - see, for example Glazzard and Bancroft's recent work (2018). In increasingly over-bureaucratised cultures, the agency of all concerned is dangerously eroded and transformational potential is reduced to teaching by numbers (literally, in the case of fashionable approaches such as Lemov's not unproblematic 'Teach Like a Champion' (2015)), currently finding a foothold in FE (Doxtator, 2018).

Lacking definition, ignored, oppressed by expectations of perfection: FE internalises the Cinderella metaphor and is unable to articulate any sense of agency, including its own pedagogy. We literally can't speak our own language any more. The cultures and structures of FE will not fundamentally change until we develop a new lexicon, one which neither harps back to the past nor apes the language of neo-liberalism.

### **'Transformation' and empowerment**

As we begin to explore potential links between transformation and empowerment it is important to acknowledge that despite its popularity, transformation is not a value neutral term. Transformation as a metaphor has a dark side that is not frequently discussed. It is

possible to argue that individuals driven to extreme acts (violence, self-harm, oppression) could be said to have had transformational learning experiences that have convinced them that their actions are right and justified (for a mild example see Mycroft and Weatherby in Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015). Transformation through encounter with learning is not always positive and there are plenty of educators out there who think that only 'other people' need to be transformed.

Transformation as a concept has been around educational literature for more than a century. Dewey wrote about 'the transformation of experience' (see, for example, Elkjaer in Illeris, 2018) and Jack Mezirow picked up this thread, believing as he did in the capacity of every person to engage in meaningful dialogue with themselves *and others*. Although his vision has been transmuted into a focus on the individual in recent years, Mezirow's theories of transformative learning still encapsulate the struggle between education and the commodification of human beings (Mezirow, 2000). Addressing his concept of *perspective* transformation - "a structural change in the way we see ourselves and our relationships" - he openly criticised competency-based education and accountability focused systems in adult learning (Mezirow, 1978). Sadly, change has not flowed towards transformative ideas but disappointingly away. As we have explored, the inevitability of this is seen as axiomatic (as is the conflation of economic growth with 'progress' (Bregman, 2016)). Education for all, as long as we all want the same thing. It is little wonder that we cling onto those glimmers of potential change that emerge as transformational/tragic life stories. In an ideal world we hope that those who have had transformative experiences through learning can go on to influence policy and practice, but this is not happening quickly enough to change the world in complex times (Wilson, 2015).

We all stand on the shoulders of giants and Mezirow's inspiration Paulo Freire (1970), wrote of conscientization: the need to name, challenge and confront oppressive relationships, whether they be personal or systematic. Whilst the experiences of some individuals will undoubtedly be personally transformative, no organisation can truthfully claim to be the instigator of that. The problem is rooted in the tangled expectations of our profession: transformation on the one hand and accountability on the other. Measurement of performance, leading to profit and financial sustainability, is now managerially more important than the educational experience itself. This culture is set at the very top of the ladder, manifest in posters displayed prominently at the Department for Education during 2017: "If it can be measured, it can be monitored." Culturally, if not economically, the trickle-down effect works.

### 3. Pedagogy: 'Good Help' in FE

#### **Critical Question:**

*How can FE enable everyone to 'feel hopeful, identify their own purpose and confidently take action'?*

Surveying the public sector as a whole, NESTA (2018) define 'good help' as supporting people to, 'feel hopeful, identify their own purpose and confidently take action'. Recognisable in FE, 'bad help' is defined as 'undermining people's confidence, sense of purpose and independence' (p.1). Where FE pedagogy is angled towards economic outcomes, it leads to

**Commented [JT1]:** Where are these posters? Have you got a photograph of one?

**Commented [LM2R1]:** No, I'd likely be arrested if I got my camera out at Sanctuary Buildings. I had to be escorted to the toilet.

'bad help' learning cultures, where dependency finds a secure foothold. There is synchronicity between a 'bad help' approach and the 'tragic life story' culture.

We contend that 'pedagogy' - a mindful, intentional and theoretically grounded practice of teaching - is an essential pre-requisite for 'good help' learning. We define pedagogy as both what happens in the classroom and the impact on students of what happens outside the classroom. In this sense, the idea of pedagogy as the art and science of learning and teaching (Knowles, cited in Illeris, 2018) is complemented by the idea of disposition, not in the sense of the passive 'natural' teacher but in an active acknowledgement that pedagogy extends beyond actions. A meaningful pedagogy is only possible where the teacher has enough autonomy to exercise their judgement and does so in pursuit of creating a learning environment where each student can discover, identify and reinforce their own sense of purpose: good help. Where organisational conditions are oppressive, this level of autonomy is unlikely and as a consequence, pedagogy becomes a shadow of itself, reduced to actions, 'tools' and outcomes.

We strongly resist being drawn into a false dichotomy of 'traditional' and 'progressive' approaches to pedagogy, which plays out so unhelpfully on Twitter and occasionally elsewhere. This damaging binary allows for no room to "let newness in" (Rushdie, 1988) and anchors FE to a (possibly rose-tinted) past which has little relevance for a complex future. The uncertainties of now require new pedagogies which re-think past hegemonies and educators need thinking time to determine these: impossible as a unicorn in some organisations. To return to Gramsci, this is an 'interregnum' for FE, as well as for much else. For too long, FE has been trying to fix itself in response to the exhausting whirl of policy changes, layering sticking plaster on sticking plaster until it resembles an unholy mess of entangled and half-understood imperatives. What's needed is a fundamental re-imagining. We believe that the concept of 'good help' is as useful a place to start as any.

### **Purposeful Pedagogies**

Current pedagogies exist, which can be repurposed to local contexts. Many of these flourish (where they can) outside the FE 'system', such as the ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) organisation English for Action, which employs a purposeful pedagogy, drawing on theories of participatory education which are not un-influenced by Freire. Uniquely in ESOL, the professional network NATECLA provides a space for educators to nourish their practice outwith the organisation, providing up to date policy context alongside professional development and a campaigning voice. As long as organisations are driven not by pedagogy but by the demands of a superstructural construct, such as capitalism,\* the language (structure, culture, mindset) is set from the top.

### **Anti-Heroic Leadership**

One of the instigators of the NESTA (2018) 'Good Help' research is Richard Wilson and his earlier work around distributed leadership, 'Anti-Hero' (Wilson, 2014) offers an alternative approach which is beginning to influence FE. Wilson's anti-heroes are thought leaders for complex times, people at the heart of an organisation who have more wriggle room than their economically-obedient hierarchical leaders. In many English FE institutions, the anti-hero approach is gaining traction amongst educators positioned in the emergent,

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\* This is literally true where CEOs are appointed with non-pedagogical backgrounds.



hierarchically central role of the Advanced Practitioner, or AP (Tyler et al, 2017). Working on projects which fall outside the organisation's core business, APs (in theory at least) have space to operate and amnesty from any 'mistakes' that follow taking measured risk. This is a vulnerable place to be, in a perfectionist culture, but where these 'spaces to dance' (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015) are carved out, and particularly where they can be harnessed to the student voice – highly valued in theory (NUS, 2017) - much might be possible.

### **Research Constellations**

In our view, theory without practice is certainly sterile, but practice without theory is mindless. Consequently we argue that where educators own - and do - their own enquiry, based in practice and on collaborative critical reflection, pedagogies become more robust and student- (rather than compliance-) focused as they come from a source and point of original learning (see for example Drew, Priestley & Michael, 2016)

A complication is that FE research has - perhaps inevitably - followed the money. Major policy shifts trail funded research programmes in their wake and a positivist turn in social science research has also contributed to a patchy landscape. In particular, what is referred to as the 'non-traditional' manifestations of FE (assuming colleges at the centre), including community learning and education in prisons, are beginning to show signs of lacking robust, contemporary theoretical underpinnings. More pervasive is a sense that any research culture there used to be in FE dimmed in recent years, if indeed the mid 1990s can still be deemed recent (see, for example, CLMH 2018). Despite (a weak) inclusion in the English professional standards for FE educators (ETF, 2014 - knowing about research, rather than doing it), a research focused culture within FE as a sector is some way from being mainstream in practice.

Fortunately, we are happy to report that a recent (re)naissance is taking hold. Driven by FE educators themselves and supported by 'fellow-travellers' in higher education, a research movement is coalescing around various networks, conferences and publications such as ARPCE, LSRN, TELL (see Glossary), Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses (Daley, Orr and Petrie, 2015) and regional research meets. At the same time, professional development funding distributed via the Education and Training Foundation in England is encouraging practitioner research (as well as funding developmental projects for Advanced Practitioners, see above). Social media, particularly Twitter, connects and amplifies these 'constellations of practice' (Mycroft and Sidebottom, 2018).

### **Thinkers are our Friends**

Initial teacher education has some culpability in the anti-theory culture that has burdened further education in recent decades - and we write as teacher educators. Tired, outdated reading lists and easy theory tropes at best fail to inspire and at worst replicate education's inequalities. Where are the women on teacher education reading lists? Where are the writers of colour? Where, indeed, are the videos, research reports and podcasts which can inspire, engage and provide 'good science'? There is an urgent need to decolonise teacher education curricula and research (Patel, 2015). The FE workforce is as diverse as its student population. It is time this was reflected in its professional formation.

Resistance to 'theory' is also endemic amongst educators who have not traditionally been required to have higher level qualifications and who may experience some defensive

'impostor syndrome' when asked to engage with dusty theories which seem alien to practice. A 'thinkers are our friends' approach (Mycroft, 2012, inspired by teacher education student Liz O'Brien), assumes all parties (including the dusty theorists) are equal thinkers, creating personal theories of practice which only differ by how publicly available they are.

### **Diffraction Practice**

Finally, we wish to challenge the old 'reflective practice' axiom, which took a firm hold across education from the 1990s onwards. There's nothing wrong with reviewing one's practice in a critical, self-aware manner, particularly when that is connected with the practice of a personal ethics (Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018). But how often is that the case? Reflection operates in isolation, holding up a mirror to the individual, with the potential to further pathologise the practice of the educator in a perfectionist culture.

A diffractive practice, rather like a kaleidoscope, brings in diverse perspectives of others (CLMH, 2018). A collaborative critical approach to reflection further invites a deepening of the thinking to move beyond review of actions to a searching of underlying values, principles, beliefs and assumptions. Optical metaphors are not uncommon in education and Barad (2007) defines diffraction as not just looking at what happened, but looking at the impact of what happened, in process with others, to bring in much needed 'newness' to pedagogies struggling under the weight of a schizophrenic culture.

### **The time is now: what's next for FE?**

#### **Critical Question:**

*How can FE 'get up and get on with it'?*

Given the challenges, crisis of identity and underfunding endemic in FE you would be excused for thinking that the sector had been stunned into inaction, retreating to lick its metaphorical wounds and defend itself from attack. This is only partially the case. The sector (or sectors if you see Northern Ireland, Scotland, England and Wales as the separate policy areas they are) has become entirely accustomed to flux, renewal and 'innovation'. Accustomed, however, does not mean accepting (Edwards et al 2007). At a glance the perception that nothing ever stands still in FE is a mistake easily forgiven. In reality, despite endless waves of policy and regime change, much in FE stays constant, for good or ill. This may sound glib, but FE has students with the same needs as they ever did, educators with the same requirements and stakeholders with the same interests. It doesn't matter how policy approaches the issues: the fundamental function of FE aka lifelong learning remains that of enabling meaningful educational experiences for all who come through its doors.

It's a fool's errand to try and formulate any sort of plan that will have wholesale meaningful impact on a sector as diffuse as FE. The diversity of the sector is its issue and its strength. Although we have taken pains to show that FE can have a defined identity, there remain a great many individual organisations each with their own constellations of practice and specific cultures and trying to legislate for this amorphous diversity inevitably leads to that sticking plaster mentality, an attempt to bandage injuries inflicted by relentless reform. What FE constellations do have in common is inertia: frozen like petrified deer in the face of existential threat. Foley channels Bergson's notion of petrification: "*The petrified are not easy to deal with. They have resolved to stop changing and so rage at the manifestations of*

*change all around.*" (2013, p.41). Inertia presents in so many ways: obduracy, self-protection, a dogged commitment to personally held values, subversion and resistance to new ideas - but petrification has protected FE to the extent that it has held its form despite unimaginable provocation. Without it, much reform would have cut deeper and harder than it has. Inertia can and does act as a filter and renders pointless any further reform which stops short of fatal devastation.

However, it is time to get up and move on. This is a call to arms. The opposite of inertia is momentum and in FE this takes the form of an affirmative sector wide movement focused on robust self-owned evidence, which attempts to remove itself from the constraints of bureaucracy, endless reform and policy shift. A movement that attends to the constant and never changing purpose of FE. Those working as educators know FE's value, its potential and moreover its future.

This call to arms is directed at leaders and managers. A call to be bold and brave enough to re-develop autonomy and engage with alternative possibilities for the future. Engagement with the ideas outlined here does not mean abandoning all aspects of education for positive economic futures, but it does mean putting pedagogy first. We argue that the same measures can be achieved within a policy context aligned with the value of the human, not exclusively their potential economic worth. FE is not a means to an end but a means within itself.

It is time to ditch the self-fulfilling prophecy that will inevitably consume any remaining aspirations of learning for the greater good and remove the pressure from FE. Let the sector develop its partnerships, pathways, methods and processes without continued reform. Repeated compliance is draining and remains stubbornly meaningless in the face of relentless, foundationless change. The language of marketing has no place within education and those that espouse it have a whole world of commerce to plunder. Education only needs marketing when it is funded to promote competition. Continually weighing the pig without feeding it or giving it time to grow, will make it lose weight. Continually starving FE and measuring it whilst blaming it for poor performance breeds resentment and failure. Educators deserve better, students deserve better and FE deserves better.

FE needs time and space to recover and regroup. We boldly call on policy makers to leave the sector alone for **three years** and see what it formulates in response to its obligations. Thinkers need time to think so that action can develop that is meaningful. This of course would inevitably mean that it steps out of line with the political cycle and in the current climate that is unlikely to happen, so leaders from within the sector also need to answer the call. The idea of anti-heroic leadership is intensely appealing and further adds weight to the sense that ultimately the future of FE lies in its people.

We are caught in a round of endless, meaningless sticking-plaster change. It is time to be incisive, to encourage FE's wounds to be exposed and allow time for them to heal. The cycle of victimhood needs to come to an end and the sector be allowed to coalesce and speak for itself. In the course of our work we meet countless bright, talented, frustrated FE people and this convinces us that our profession has all the resources it needs to carry out this life-saving endeavour.

5908 words

### **Glossary**

ARPCE: Association for Research in Post compulsory Education

LSRN: Learning and Skills Research Network

FE: Post Compulsory Education and Training

TELL: Teacher Education in Lifelong Learning

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