

The meaning of "reprofessionalisation"

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In February, NATFHE's *The Lecturer* hailed a deal between unions and the Association of Colleges about training for lecturers. The Assistant Secretary for FE Dan Taubman claimed that this is 'a significant first step in reprofessionalising the FE workforce'.

'Reprofessionalisation' implies that the deal could lead eventually to lecturers "having more control over teaching and learning processes. But might not such a move entail reviving artisan-type relations with management - for example, the inviolability of what each lecturer does "in the classroom"? It may not be possible to revive such relations, but in any case is craft exclusivity what we want? Again, reprofessionalisation might imply that we become more like professionals in the sense of people who live from fees rather than wages and who collectively regulate their own practice. Most FE lecturers have never been professionals in this sense, but the suggestion that this is possible could be used to justify making more and more lecturers self employed, a few as freelances, most as agency workers.

Professionalisation of workers normally implies that they come to own enough of the means of production to exploit their own labour power - the opposite of proletarianisation. But in the case of FE lecturers, the process by which relatively privileged salaried employees are being deprived of their status and job security currently takes the form of their reclassification as self-employed persons - freelances, agency staff, consultants and the like - in short, of casualisation by petty bourgeoisification.

The real issue is our struggle as workers, in which the struggle over who controls teaching and learning is a dimension of the struggle over pay and conditions, and vice versa. Are we to guide ourselves in these struggles by ideas that we develop, or are we, because of the absence or defeat of such ideas, to be controlled by ideas that serve the employers' interests alone.

The Government cannot give us control over our work. The more it presents itself as doing so, the more it arrogates this control to itself. We can acquire such control only by taking it for ourselves. We both can and should start to do this, but we will not get far unless we (a) act in alliance with other workers, and (b) act consciously on behalf of working class students. Both these conditions demand that we reject the privileges - whether real or imaginary - of professional status.

Lecturers as a group can control their own practice only if they themselves develop a theory of that practice. There is never a total absence of theory. Some general view always governs your activity, whether you know it or not. Two or more theories may for a time cancel one another out, but eventually every practitioner aligns him or herself with one body of theory and

against another. You cannot become independent of the dominant theory if you are isolated from it. The only way to free yourself from it is to know enough about it to work out your own. to the end this working out must be collective. Ideas that arise in an individual as a result of reflection on practice need to be tested in debate and fed back into practice. We should campaign through NATFHE for forms of teacher education, staff development and training which increase opportunities for this, and against forms which reduce them.

The same goes for the content of training, to principle we should be for training that helps us acquire knowledge of pre-existing theory, and against training that would render such knowledge more difficult to achieve. However, the training on offer is likely both to present the dominant theories and to obscure their real significance. Therefore we must press for it to include at all stages discussion-centred critical thinking, through which practitioners can develop their capacity to work out this significance for themselves.

Demand

When new educational theory is promulgated from above, managers invariably demand that lecturers abandon the practice they have evolved over the preceding period. The new approach itself is presented both as proven beyond question and necessarily more progressive than the thinking of practitioners. If, then, we want to be guided by our own ideas as they emerges from experience, rather than letting management impose on us in this way, we must secure spaces in which this emergence can take place. Therefore we must develop strategies for blocking management innovations that do not easily lay us open to the charge of partial performance.

Left factions to teacher unions tend to set aside consideration of what education is for, on the grounds that attention to such issues obstructs organisation round pay and conditions. They are wrong. They should start developing, alongside and in interaction with their practical activity, an analysis of how education and training relate to the mode of production, the labour process and the formation of class consciousness. But at present there is a gap, which itself requires explanation, where this analysis should be. Left groups' demands concerning education are nearly always *ad hoc* attempts to cover up this gap, usually by some left version of reformist demands.

If those on the left in education have no theory of their own, and even worse if they think that they have such a theory when they have not, what they will have, inevitably, is a version of the dominant one. Further, because not having a theory of

their own means that they cannot recognise this dominant theory for what it is - or indeed see that it is a theory at all, rather than just commonsense - it invades their practical work as union organisers and undermines its effectiveness. The emphasis on training for FE lecturers is such an invasion. Soon we shall see some Michael Barber proving the necessity for lecturers to have QTS etc, along a line prepared by such 'experts' as Alan Smithers and Alison Wolf. By presenting employment-related FE, especially on its industrial side, as worthless, such commentators are imposing an ideological agenda which, taken to its logical conclusion, would abolish FE (as distinct from schooling, HE and non vocational Adult Ed.), and thereby the jobs of non 'academic' lecturers. That in turn would destroy what remains of the pro-union culture that former industrial workers who become lecturers bring into colleges, thereby abolishing the best basis for rebuilding a democratic and fighting NATFHE. It is essential that NATFHE spokespersons go on the offensive in the media against these 'experts'.

'Re-professionalisation' of lecturing implies some form of post compulsory General Teaching Council. This body, precisely by focusing on 'professional' issues in contradistinction to 'industrial relations', would base itself on a definition of industrial relations which the employers would like us to operate with - for example, harmony not conflict, a 'right to manage' and separation of industrial relations from professional issues. We should oppose the setting up of such a body and show why it can be nothing other than a cover for performance-related pay. We should also explain to everyone who may be tempted by it where PRP itself must lead.

The offer of PRP in exchange for training will be used to tempt lecturers desperate for better pay into giving up control over areas of their working lives where they exercise it now. A bloc of quangos, including FENTO, the LSDA, ABSA and the post compulsory wing of Ofsted, in alliance with the AOC and LSCs themselves, will seek to strip the skill and autonomy out of lecturers. They will try to do this in particular via superlecturers and lead teachers, who will become their agents at the point of production, tasked with 'finding' shortcomings that demand retraining. Far from being a move towards higher standards, this will accelerate - and at the same time camouflage - the growth of a casualised workforce, linked via appraisal systems and target setting to performance-related pay, a development which, if unchecked, must lead eventually to payment by results, zero-hours contracts, soft contracts, payment by the piece and lecturers subcontracting their teaching to locums. A GTC for post-16 will be primarily a means of legitimising the power of superlecturers and line managers over the teaching, learning and assessment procedures operated by casualised staff.

At the same time, the quangos will develop models of teaching, learning and assessment. In the past, the models that structure curricular, pedagogic and organisational change in post compulsory education have been developed by a bipartite approach between employers and unions in industry (in the 1960s and 1970s), and (in the 1980s) by thinkers from MSC. The model now comes from ministerial advisers (for example, Andrew Adonis), thinktanks like the IPPR, universities' education departments, and the media empires to which all of these are subservient. Any system of teacher competences that the state introduces via such agencies into post-16 education will necessarily be neither subject- nor occupation-specific - in short, Key Skills for lecturers. As with Key Skills generally,

this model is likely to be based on a minimalist approach that involves the mapping of 'basic skills' and as such will tend to be invalidated by lack of attention to reasoning and collective self organisation. Such an approach may seem better than the traditional one in which intending practitioners were required to memorise a sanitised history of institutions. But in reality neither approach is adequate, each is the corollary of the other, and both of them together would still be unsatisfactory. NATFHE should demand instead an enskilling version of teacher education, in which knowledge, understanding and skill are taught and learnt in an interactive manner, in close relation to real-life experience, with space for discussion, and assessed on criteria negotiated amongst all those whose interests are involved.

Forcing lecturers to undergo retraining is an attempt to make us, the deliverers of lifelong learning to others, into recipients of it ourselves - but not in forms we choose. For workers in our position, employer-sponsored lifelong learning must always tend to turn into repeated self-deskilling. All deskilling is potentially progressive to the extent that it reflects a long term trend towards homogenisation of forms of labour power and the breaking down of craft and professional exclusiveness. But realisation of this potential in FE now depends on us demanding, for ourselves and for a broader range of working class people, opportunities to enhance our general skilfulness. The alternative we oppose to deskilling should not be a return to craft exclusiveness but an advance towards generic competence.

Such a demand should be based on developments that already exist rather than on wish-lists. We need to focus attention on instances where practitioners themselves have developed valid practice, for example the consortia organised around work with craft students by General Studies lecturers in the early 1980s. Official ideology tends to bury such instances. Against this tendency, we should insist through NATFHE that teacher education and staff development takes account of the real history of FE, including the history from below known to experienced practitioners. We should demand that some of the money for 're-professionalisation' be put into recording and researching such history, while starting to do this work for ourselves anyway.

Imposition

'Reprofessionalisation' of lecturers is one example of the state imposition of lifelong learning - that is, the extension of the ideological side of the Youth Training Scheme (YTS) to all working class people from school leaving age to retirement. Its aim is to move still more sections of the labour force towards de-skilled work, either on short term contracts or distributed via agencies, much of it paid by the piece, interspersed with periods of unemployment, in which benefits are means-tested, minimised and conditional on voluntary work and/or 'study'. That people will resist this is not in question. The question is, rather, how high the level of this resistance will be and whether it will be conducted within a backward-looking framework or within one which looks to improvements that working class people themselves could bring into being. Only those forced to undergo this 'learning' can answer these questions - to the extent that and by the way in which they organise themselves when they resist. Our resistance as lecturers has two aspects -

that in which we resist the attempt to make us de-skill ourselves, and that in which we resist the attempt to make us de-skill others.

The drive to make us de-skill ourselves entails that we as lecturers will be pressed to work with those assigned to retrain us - for example superlecturers - to produce ourselves as bearers of labour power that is more useful to the employers than before, labour power that is necessarily less skilled than that which we possess now. One of our strengths in this situation will be that the attempt to do this partly via retraining (as distinct from simply by changing our working conditions) requires our collaboration, which we can therefore threaten to withhold. We can make the trainers' work more or less easy.

A second strength will be that our opposite numbers in other fields will also be undergoing retraining. The lines that have separated workers in the different public services are being eroded, and so too, with privatisation, out-sourcing and best value, is the public service ethos itself, which is why we are hearing more and more about the necessity for professionalisation, standards, quality, trust and the like. Enforced retraining will be going on across most of the areas that we now think of as public services. The aim is to form a working class with two wings - those who are victims of casualisation and those who enforce it. However, a high proportion of those who work in the enforcing institutions will themselves be casualised. Along with a system of material privileges, the state must develop an ideology to mark off those sections of the working class who are to administer, teach, enforce, 'advise', assess and organise from those who are to receive these 'services', and the closer these two groups are to one another, the more necessary strident this ideology - that of 'lifelong learning' - will become.

A further function of lecturer retraining will be to accredit with pedagogic expertise management aspirants who do not acquire this through experience, which has as its corollary the nullification of practitioners' knowledge and experience. Previous qualifications and experience will be officially pronounced worthless and their possessors in need of retraining, not in the valid form from which all could benefit, but in a bogus form decreed from above. But aspirant managers, lacking such experience and therefore not questioning the value of this training, will be more pliable trainees than us, and thus appear as the people who should be rewarded with money and authority.

Through this process, most practitioners will move closer towards joining a pool of generalised workers who can migrate between education, housing, law, employment advice, medicine, social security, youthwork and careers. The higher grades of Key Skills, including the training on offer to us, are really about giving people the capacity to move between these occupations. In short, far from 'reprofessionalisation', the recent agreement declares that the employers and the state intend to push still further the destruction of a stable workforce in such fields as FE. Professional standards and the like are being talked up now exactly as quality was previously, to conceal and facilitate their abolition. But in the end there can be no such thing as a teacherless college. Post compulsory education cannot fulfil the function demanded of it by the employers without the expertise of practising lecturers, who therefore retain the power to demand that it fulfil a better function altogether. •

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