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## **Fragments Stored against My Ruin: the place of educational theory in the professional development of teachers in further education**

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**ABSTRACT** Teacher training is now a requirement for new staff in the further education sector in England. The Sector Skills Council, LifeLong Learning UK, sets national standards for training that include Reflective Practice as an underpinning value and Learning Theory as part of training programmes. There is, however, no statement of what is meant by reflective practice or of what learning theory should be included. Teacher trainers are free to determine the meaning of these terms. This article reports a Learning and Skills Development Agency funded survey of trained and experienced teachers in further education, which showed that they hold positive views about reflective practice, but mixed views about theory, which is perceived by many solely as codified, propositional theory, associated with canonical names, such as Bloom and even Skinner. The rest of the article will attempt to prepare ground for a debate within the further education community in England about what professional knowledge should be developed in initial training. In particular, what codified theory should be encountered and how should this connect with a reflective practice model of initial training?

### **Introduction**

This article is intended to contribute to debate about the professional development of teachers in Further Education (FE) in England, focusing particularly upon the place of educational theory in professional development and its interrelationship with reflective practice, which is the organising principle of most training courses. The article will draw upon the insights of a Learning and Skills Development Agency project

that researched the perceptions of teachers about the usefulness of their initial training.

Compulsory initial training to teach in English FE is relatively new. An observer of policy in England for the training of teachers in further education in 2000 would have seen that, of a total teaching staff of about 137,000, around 20,000 teachers held no teaching qualification; and there was no data on another 40,000 (Further Education Funding Council [FEFC], 2002).

The Further Education Funding Council (1999) investigated professional development in further education in 108 colleges, all of which had received high grades for quality assurance. Despite this, the report summary states that there are 'relatively low levels of finance allocated to staff development' and 'low priority given to pedagogic skills'. (p. 1)

The inescapable implication is that there may have been a policy assumption that teacher knowledge of a vocational subject was sufficient, without knowledge of pedagogy – theoretical and procedural knowledge about teaching. Teaching as pedagogy, which in current practice for the initial training of teachers in Further Education in England may be described as reflective professional practice, as distinct from untrained staff transmitting their specialist knowledge and skills in any way they think fit, is a recent development for many teachers. In 1998, the Further Education National Training Organisation for (FENTO) was created, which produced National Training standards (FENTO, 1999) that set the professional knowledge and understanding required to perform effectively as an FE teacher. From 2001 it became compulsory for all new entrants to teaching in further education to be trained, and colleges were encouraged to train existing, untrained, staff. To be funded, all FE training courses in England must be endorsed by FENTO, now part of the Sector Skills Council for FE, Lifelong Learning UK.[1]

This relatively new emphasis in England on the importance of the quality of teaching in FE is exemplified by Office for Standards in Education reports into successful and unsuccessful colleges (Ofsted, 2004a, b), which highlight the importance of high quality teaching in distinguishing successful and failing colleges. In failing colleges, 'There has been insufficient monitoring of the impact of professional development on teaching and learning' (Ofsted, 2004a, p. 10). By contrast, successful colleges are characterised by the presence of self-critical, professional teachers:

The most distinctive characteristic of these very good teachers is that their practice is the result of careful reflection, of advance planning which predicts what might occur and which accommodates the particular needs of all their students whose strengths and weaknesses they know intimately. Nothing is left to chance. Moreover they themselves also learn lessons each

time they teach, evaluating what they do and using these self-critical evaluations to adjust what they do next time. (Ofsted, 2004a, p. 9)

Now that all FE teachers in England are required to be trained, it was thought timely to research what trained teachers thought of their initial training. Did it help them to teach and to support learning?

### **Recollected in Tranquility? FE Teachers' Perceptions of their Initial Teacher Training**

The Learning and Skills Development Agency funded a 2-year project (Harkin et al, 2003) to research the perceptions of teachers in further education of the usefulness of initial teacher training (ITT) in helping them to teach and to support learning. The seven key areas of teaching and supporting learning set out in the FENTO (1999) standards were used as a frame. Two-hundred-and-forty-four teachers who had been trained to teach within the previous 10 years, from 10 general further education colleges in London and the South-east of England, returned valid questionnaires and 50 of the teachers were subsequently interviewed by telephone to deepen understanding of the themes that emerged from the questionnaire data.

All seven areas of teaching and supporting learning set out in the FENTO standards were perceived by teachers to have been improved by initial training. The most helpful aspects of ITT were perceived to be planning programmes, developing a range of techniques and reflecting on one's own performance. A typical view of reflective practice as an organising principle of initial training was expressed by a teacher who said:

I think that the whole notion of reflective practitioners seems to remain as a large heading on teacher training programmes and so it should be.

One aspect of initial training that emerged as relatively more problematic, however, was the importance of educational theory. Teachers held a wider diversity of views about this than any other aspect of their training and also found this topic more difficult to talk about with ease of recall. Each ITT course is free to develop its own identity, and the study indicates that theory is perceived, remembered and employed differently by different teachers, although there appeared to be no correlation between attitude to theory, level of educational qualifications and academic, or vocational teaching area.

As the place of theory in initial training had emerged as a contested issue in analysing the 244 teacher questionnaires, telephone interviews

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with 50 teachers included three interlinked questions about theory. The questions were:

- *Could you tell me what the word 'theory' means to you?*
- *Can you give me an example of 'theory' taught or used in your initial training?*
- *Did you find this or other 'theory' useful or not in your teaching?*

The questions gave rise to widely differing responses. In general, there was a tendency to view theory solely as propositional knowledge or published academic work, particularly canonical work, even if it seems unlikely to have been cited much or at all in initial training to teach in FE. Interestingly, in response to these questions about theory in initial training, teachers did not mention the development of their own theories-in-use, linked to reflective practice.

Many teachers wanted to name theorists in their response, some with more success than others:

About Skinner's rats and all.

I can't think of people's names off the top of my head.

Many teachers were quite disparaging about theory:

Theory seemed unnecessary.

... very difficult to relate theory to what I was teaching.

some of it ... especially by educationalists, was balderdash ...  
not relevant to everyday teaching.

Some teachers mentioned the disputed nature of theory, but without acknowledging that theory by its nature should be open to disputation:

I mean theories are just one person's opinion about something  
and it might be different for you.

One has one view and someone else contradicts.

An example of different perceptions of a particular theory is shown by differing opinions of Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1956, 1964), one of the more frequently mentioned theories:

... like Bloom's Taxonomy, went over my head.

The theories were the useful bits for me. Bloom's taxonomy  
put things into perspective for me.

Psychological theories were the most frequently mentioned, such as the work of Bloom, Maslow, Skinner and the concept of Learning Styles:

I found the psychology parts of more interest – the theory behind the practice.

For some, insight into educational theory was the best part of the course:

Theory? I loved it, soaked it up like a sponge. All these 'ologies'.

In general, however, the comment below sums up many teachers' opinion of 'theory':

We need to be very clear in the way we design initial teacher training that asks students to apply theory to their practice, rather than just to study it for the sake of it.

The ITT project data as a whole, however, indicates that as well as published, codified theory, often associated with canonical authors, about which teachers may feel hostile or guilty, they also develop what Schön (1983, 1987) called theories-in-use, personal theory that is integrated into continuing practice.

Responses to questions about peer-based processes, such as micro-teaching and peer observation, show the importance that teachers place not on published theory, but on ideas that can be tried out in their own practice:

Observation of other lecturers' classes enabled me to observe a variety of teaching styles and classroom management

Working with others, getting other people's ideas and collaborating in projects

Different teachers accommodate different theories and ideas from peers to their own practices in an idiosyncratic process that indicates why reflective practice – as a means of linking the general to the particular – is valued by teachers as an organising principle of ITT programmes. Engagement with tutors and peers expose student teachers to a wide range of educational theories and ideas that they can try out in practice. If they do not work, they are discarded or labelled as irrelevant; if they do work, they become invisible as identifiable theory – this is from Maslow; this from my peer X – and become simply part of what Moon (1999) referred to as 'a useable network of knowledge that further guides practice' (p. 53).

The absence in teachers' responses of links between codified educational theory, and the reflective practice processes of working with others to develop their teaching and theories-in-use may be due to a more widespread lack of clarity in England about the interrelationship between practical and theoretical components of ITT courses. In a comparative study of school teacher training for the Universities Council

for the Education of Teachers (UCET) Moon (1998) found that in England less attention is paid to the relationship between practical and theoretical components of ITT courses than in most other countries of Europe. The FENTO standards for FE initial training include knowledge of 'learning theory, teaching approaches and methodologies' but do not indicate how these elements may be linked, nor how they relate to reflective practice which the Standards state as an underpinning value of FE teacher training.

The rest of this article will attempt to prepare some of the ground for a debate within the further education community in England about what professional knowledge should be developed in initial training, and in particular what codified theory should be encountered, and how this should connect with individual teacher's personal theories-in-use through a reflective practice model of initial training?

### **The Meaning of 'Theory' in Initial Teacher Training**

The meaning of the term 'theory' in English teacher education has long been contentious. 'Trendy' education theories are periodically held to blame for undermining education. For example, the Chief Inspector of Schools (BBC, 2004) criticised the 'Teaching theories of the 1960s and 1970s as 'plain crackers'; however, Mercer (1995) pointed out that those who attack 'theory', in fact, hold their own theories of education and that 'theory' is not the real target of these attacks, but rather a different ideology of education about what should be taught, how and to whom.

Buntic (2002) shows that a conceptual continuum may be traced in the relationship between research-based, propositional theory and teaching. Teaching may be viewed as a science (Reynolds, 1998); teaching may be viewed as an art that may be founded on a scientific base (Hargreaves, 1997); it may be held that there is an indirect relationship between research-based knowledge and teaching, but that teaching involves other sorts of knowledge too (Hammersley, 1997; McIntyre, 1997); or that teaching is a form of practical reasoning, an ethical activity leading to unpredictable ends and so not susceptible to codifying in propositional form (Stenhouse, 1981; Carr, 1995). Some writers (e.g. Elbaz, 1983; Woods, 1985; Goodson, 1991) argue that teachers' knowledge is so constrained and determined by the contexts in which they work and their professional knowledge is so tacit that narrative approaches to articulating that knowledge have to be enough. Their voices and perspectives are more valuable than the voices of 'expert' theoreticians.

Eraut (1994), in his account of different conceptions of professional knowledge, shows how difficult it is to conceptualise its complexities. At the heart of this complexity is the interaction of two broad types of knowledge: publicly codified propositional knowledge; and personal, tacit, performative knowledge. Similarly Eisner (2002), following Aristotle,

distinguished *episteme*, true and certain knowledge, from *phronesis*, the ability to deal with the dynamics of practical situations which requires artistry, or learning 'to make things well' (p. 384).

Pring (2000) holds that:

Claims to 'theory', especially in education, are often rather spurious because they are expressed so vaguely or so blandly that it is not at all clear what would count as evidence against them. (p. 125)

Thomas (1997) argued strongly that whilst theory may be useful in the physical sciences – although even here with reservations – it is of very limited use in education because there is little consensus about its meaning and the term may cow teachers into a conservative practice that undermines their own professional knowledge. Thomas advocates 'ad hocery', the piecemeal clearing of confusion and developing better ways of working. He concludes by saying:

I return to Carr's appeal for theory, where theory is reflection and thought. I agree on the merit of reflection and thought, but why call reflection and thought 'theory,' when 'theory' carries with it the epistemological baggage that it does? (p. 101).

Even if we could agree about what we mean by 'theory', and whether or not it is a useful term, there is a potentially bewildering abundance of different theories on offer to trainee teachers. The Teaching into Practice website (<http://tip.psychology.org>) alone lists more than 50 learning theories. Teachers and teacher trainers are not equipped to judge the validity and reliability of these theories, although they may regard some as more useful in practice than others. A critical review of the theory of learning styles conducted by Coffield and others (2004) found that the evidence base for many of these theories is weak. For example, in reviewing one of the most widely used theoretical instruments in further education teacher training, Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory (LSI), the report concludes that there is continuing conflict about both its reliability and its validity (p. 66). The report endorses very few learning styles theories and inventories and urges caution, in particular about individualised learning.

Thomas cites Mouzelis (1995) who distinguished theory as statements that can be proved or disproved, from theory as tools for thinking. It is the latter sense of 'theory' that is more applicable to initial teacher training. Education theories are means to clarify the complexities of teaching and learning, in order to help teachers understand more fully what it is they wish to achieve with learners and how this may best be accomplished. In this sense, theorising is a very practical and potentially useful activity. It follows that theories that do not help teachers in their practice will be disregarded by them and that what counts as a 'useful'

theory among the many on offer will, as shown in teachers' responses to questions about theory, always vary between teachers and remain contentious. It is the use of 'theory' as tools for thinking, to aid reflection and professional development, that is prominent in teacher training programmes. It is the teaching not of science but of 'applied science with coaching in the artistry of reflection-in-action' (Schön, 1987, p. xii).

Vygotsky (1962) held that there is no continuum of thought that leads inevitably from practical, situational knowledge to systematic, theoretical knowledge. They involve different types of discourse about teaching. Teacher trainers who wish to find ways to link the two, given constraints of time on courses, use shortcuts, such as the LSI, to give a flavour of more systematic thinking about learning and teaching that may be used by teachers to help them reflect on and develop their professional practices.

Constrained by time and by the understandable desire of teachers to focus on developing immediate practice, constrained also by the training and experience of teacher trainers, courses of initial training offer only fragments of theory, rather than systematic bodies of knowledge. Different courses present different fragments, depending largely on the choices and predilections of the trainers. One trainer may prefer to draw on theories of transactional analysis; another may never touch on this, but focus on theories of the construction of knowledge drawn from the work of Vygotsky and Bruner; yet another may never mention these, but spend time on different theories of learner motivation drawn from Maslow, Herzberg and others. There is no nationally recognised corpus of theory that all further education teachers should engage with during training. Should there be? I will return to this in the concluding discussion.

### **Theory and Reflective Practice**

Moon (1999) shows that there is a general consensus in the literature that 'reflective practice' is necessary to the professional development of teachers. It is the conceptual thrust (Smyth, 1989), rallying point (Wildman & Niles, 1987) and goal (Hatton & Smith, 1995) of many teacher education programmes. Handbooks of reflective practice, such as those of Moon (1999) and Hillier (2002) are widely used to inform practice on courses of initial training for teachers in FE. Jay & Johnson (2002) acknowledge that reflective practice is the *grand idée* of teacher education, but that 'even a brief review of the literature on teaching reflection reveals tremendous variation.' (p. 73) and may, in Eraut's (1994) word, be a 'morass', partly because Schön himself in articulating the theory fails to clearly distinguish 'reflection-in-action' from 'reflection-on-action' (Schön, 1983, 1987).

The wide acceptance of reflective practice highlights the vital importance of articulating the concept clearly, how it may be fostered, both in initial training and continuing professional development, and its relationship to pedagogic knowledge – theoretical and procedural knowledge about teaching, whether in codified, propositional form or as theories-in-use.

The concept of reflective practice may be linked to the earlier discussion of the place of theory in initial training by considering the Experiential Learning cycle (Kolb, 1984)[2] that features in so many publications on teacher education. The cycle begins with *Experience*, and proceeds to *Reflection*, then *Abstract Conceptualisation*, and finally to *Active Experimentation* and a new experience. The stage of *Abstract Conceptualisation* invites practitioners to connect their teaching experiences to a wider body of codified knowledge about learning and teaching, and also to other teachers' knowledge, in order to challenge and develop practice. This process articulates tacitly held, theories-in-action, and opens them to critical examination by peers and tutors. The purpose of this process is to aid professional learning and development. In Kolb's words, 'learning is best facilitated in an environment where there is a dialectic tension and conflict between immediate, concrete experience and analytic detachment.' (p. 9)

Eraut argues that deliberative processes lie at the heart of professional work (pp. 151-152), in contradistinction to the excessive claims of Dreyfus & Dreyfus (1986) for the role of intuition or performative knowledge. Claxton (2000) argues that:

A balanced view of intuition is one that sees it as a valuable source of hypotheses, which are nonetheless capable of being interpreted. (p. 43)

Deliberative processes may be fostered by the use of tools for thinking, drawn from codified educational theory. Even within the Dreyfus and Dreyfus model of professional development, there is a need for novices in particular to learn from codified propositional knowledge. Ecclestone (1996) pointed out that in some programmes of initial training based on reflective practice, an uncritical acceptance of Schön's ideas about artistry and intuition can lead providers to 'ignore the needs of novices and the realities of professional life.' (p. 154) She suggested that some training courses employ the term reflective practice, but start from 'where people are' – and 'leave them there' (p. 159).

Winkler (2001), drawing on Day (1993), argued that reflection on experience is a necessary but not sufficient condition for teacher development, which requires a more systematic and theoretically informed inquiry, which can confront and challenge teachers' taken-for-granted assumptions. Reflection may mean no more than comfortable narration of one's own practices, confined inevitably to local contexts

and this situational knowledge is not enough to develop expertise. For this, it is necessary to link reflection on one's personal experiences with more systematic and generalisable theoretical knowledge of teaching and learning, drawn from codified theory and from shared deliberation with peers.

Teachers should possess a body of professional knowledge based on experience and also a body of professional knowledge based on codified theory to which the experiential knowledge may be linked. Teachers should both *apprehend* what it is they do, and *comprehend* their professional actions.

This is not to disagree with Eraut's contention (2000) that teachers neither possess nor desire a quasi-scientific knowledge base, but to assert the need for critical reflection on experience, using appropriate 'tools for thinking'. This may go some way to address Furlong's (2000) belief that the reflective practice model is a weak defence of teacher autonomy because teachers are not perceived as having a body of knowledge that justifies regarding them as autonomous professionals. It is to assert the importance of critical discourse with others (Schön, 1983; Carr & Kemmis, 1996; Thomas, 1997) as constituting the heart of professionalism.

Deliberative processes are difficult to find time for in professional life, but as Eraut pointed out (1994), this is not only an issue of professional development, but of sustaining existing knowledge. Some professionals 'allow aspects of their expertise to decay ... Thus there is a need for professionals to retain critical control over the more intuitive parts of their expertise by regular reflection, self-evaluation and a disposition to learn from colleagues' (p. 155).

The LSDA research on FE teachers' perceptions of ITT found high regard for reflective practice as an organising principle of ITT courses, but that it is very difficult to maintain deliberative, reflective processes post-ITT. Many teachers said they had no time for reflection in their full-time teaching role and missed the opportunity to discuss their teaching with others:

A lot of it [reflection on practice] is a bit informal when you do it on your own in a day-to-day way, it doesn't have the same value.

Some were not sure whether they were continuing to reflect or not!

I think I reflect, but I don't consciously reflect.

Brown & McIntyre (1993) declared that 'Teachers have no time to wring their hands, reflect on complex theories of learning or motivation.' (p. 53), but the development of pedagogic knowledge during initial

training ought, somehow, to be continued throughout teachers' careers. The Dreyfus & Dreyfus model of professional development shows the need for alternate periods of propositional knowledge development linked to practice and extended experience to transform propositional knowledge to more expert performative knowledge.

How can reflective practice be continued post-initial training? How can experienced teachers who become mentors be helped to articulate their theories-in-use, their knowing more than they can say, to novices in ways that help them to improve practice?

### Concluding Discussion

These deliberations give rise to a set of more fundamental questions: What constitutes appropriate teacher development at particular stages in a teaching career? Most particularly, what educational theories and tools for thinking should be introduced in initial training in order to make reflective practice sufficiently challenging to foster professional development? Education theory has a role in the training of teachers because professional practice should be based on deliberative action, determined not only by personal experience, but also by a body of public knowledge that is open to debate and refutation.

In ITT, the process of reflective practice should both support beginning teachers and challenge and develop their theories-in-use. For this to happen, the concept of reflective practice should include an element of *abstract conceptualisation* based on published educational theory and tools for thinking. However, which theories from the many on offer? Theories come into and out of fashion – Bloom's taxonomy was once more popular than it is now; Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences was in vogue for a while; the theory of Learning Styles is currently much cited (see, for example, Association of Colleges [AOC] advice on best practice, 2003).

Teacher knowledge is complex, and situational factors are important, therefore, there ought to be considerable scope for teacher trainers, and teachers in initial training themselves, to determine in detail what theoretical and procedural knowledge about teaching to develop. There is a need, though, for greater clarity in the national training standards about what learning theory means and how this may be developed through reflective practice.

Coffield et al (2004), following their critical review of theories of learning styles, recommended that 'college lecturers will need a different form of initial teacher training ... to enable them to explore critically the more promising models and instruments [of learning styles]' (p. 134) The Report does not suggest what form this might take, nor consider the feasibility of such critical exploration by novices as part of a crowded initial training programme, for which learning styles is but one aspect of

pedagogy. Nonetheless, there is a need to review current training provision. Coffield holds that 'What is needed in the UK now is a theory (or set of theories) of pedagogy for post-16 learning, but this does not exist' (p. 142). Given the contested nature of theory, and the super-abundance of theories from which to choose, this is a Herculean, or even, as theories proliferate, Sisyphean, task. Perhaps what is needed is a more modest review, led by the national bodies most responsible for FE teacher training in England (The Institute for Learning [IfL-PC]; the Universities' Council for the Education of Teachers [UCET] and the Sector Skills Council, Lifelong Learning UK [LLUK]) of the meaning and place of educational theory in the professional development of teachers in further education, and its relationship to reflective practice as an underpinning value of training.

Following a review, should LLUK publish a best practice guide for teacher trainers that sets out the theories regarded as well founded in social science, and that may be useful to the development of professional practice in further education? Should it clarify the meaning of reflective practice and demonstrate that engagement with theory is an essential part of the reflective process? Should the guide also set out the institutional conditions in which reflective practice may be fostered, even post-initial training, because English FE colleges, at present, may not be places that are able to foster reflective practice. Schön's (1983) experience was that teachers who attempt to become reflective practitioners 'struggle against the rigid order of lesson plans, schedules, isolated classrooms, and objective measures of performance' (p. 334).

Even as I pose these questions I have doubts, based on the provisional nature of all human knowledge and the tendency of codified statements, whether published educational theory or LLUK standards should be regarded as somehow beyond challenge by practitioners. One thing, however, is clear to me. If you ask 50 trained and experienced teachers what is meant by 'theory', they should be able to link responses to their own professional practices and to give better answers than, *About Skinner's rats and all*.

#### *Acknowledgement*

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## Notes

- [1] Training for employment in England is organised into Sector Skills Councils (SSCs). The SSC for further, higher and adult education is Lifelong Learning UK.
- [2] The Experiential Learning cycle (ELC) is based on the works of Dewey, Lewin, Piaget, Polanyi and others. It is founded on the idea of a dialectical relationship between apprehension of the world and comprehension of the world. Kolb's extension of the ELC into the development of the Learning Styles Inventory (LSI), critiqued by Coffield et al (2004), does not invalidate the underlying psychological model.

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