Brilliant teaching and training does not happen by accident...

By Gail Lydon

The journey to becoming a charismatic, caring and inspirational teacher requires the use of critical reflection as a pedagogic approach

This paper, abridged from my full paper (see link, page 22), outlines the development of my teaching identities and values; and how I have sought to develop my practice. I aim to link these to appropriate theories. 

“Brilliant teaching and training does not happen by accident... Brilliant teachers and trainers can adjust their teaching approaches and mix of techniques flexibly and rapidly, based on their professional judgments about what will work best.” (IfL, 2010 p4)

I was taught at primary school by a charismatic, caring and inspirational teacher. I wanted to be like him and I recognise that he is the metaphor I use to describe the teacher I would like to be. I was influenced by the values he modelled, which are discussed by Coffield (2009); for example, how we acquire intelligence.

By the age of 16, some of this positive thinking had been knocked out of me and I studied business instead, but I was rather disillusioned. Following graduation, I worked for a number of blue-chip companies. Having children sparked an old flame and I reinvestigated teaching. I have been teaching and supporting learning for 20 years, working in all areas of the sector.

Teaching identities

Associating with others – in other words being involved in various communities of practice (CoP) – has been an important aspect of my work. I have found, as Bathmaker and Avis (2009) did, a range of cultures within the further education sector. For example, as an improvement adviser for the Learning and Skills Improvement Service, I found that departments, sites and faculties have their own culture, which can challenge management action.

The professional identity of an FE teacher, as presented by IfL (2013a), resulted in a structure for continuing professional development (CPD). The requirements to be qualified and to offer evidence of CPD were greeted with hostility by some when instigated in 2008. The issue of whether being qualified would improve performance was debated in many a staff room.

It may be that, for some FE teachers and trainers, the lack of a teaching qualification or a professional body does not stop them from having professional identities. The communities of practice associated with their vocational area may be sufficient through ‘occupational socialisation’ (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009) by internalising these identities. Perhaps the qualifications were too closely related to role rather than identities? However, being qualified is linked to how I visualise (and describe) myself as teacher.

I agree with IfL when it says: “Teaching and training in FE and skills is not an amateur exercise where some skills are picked up as you go along or through an induction process.” (IfL, 2013a p5)

But Goodson and Hargreaves (cited in Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009 p968) suggest we need to distinguish between ‘professionalism’ and ‘professionalisation’ and perhaps much of what I gained from my qualifications was due to my reflective practice rather than the make-up of the courses themselves. Theory is useless to the teacher if they cannot (or do not) relate it to their practice or indeed make theory practical (Lucas et al, 2012).

Others have championed the need for qualified teachers in FE, for example Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) and the National Research and Development Centre (NRDC, 2005), whose research linked teacher qualifications to learner achievement.

This success was also in part due to teamwork and staff understandings, values and beliefs (highlighting the importance of CoPs). The writers also stated that all teachers should be confident in their literacy and numeracy skills.

Critical reflection

IfL (2013b) lists a range of CPD activities and, while it does not specifically mention critical reflection, it does acknowledge critical incident analysis. I have used this approach but find that sometimes it is the mundane rather than the critical that stimulates my reflection. As Bolton (2010) contends, it is sometimes the incidents we forget which need to be examined. For me critical incidents require reflection in action perhaps followed by reflection on action.

The Kolb Learning Cycle made sense during my initial teacher training, but was theoretical. In practice, I found the process was not always linear; I have sparks of insight here and there. Afterwards I can reflect, perhaps attempting to ‘see though student’s eyes’ (Brookfield, 1995 p10) and this is where insight into the mundane might lie.

I have also engaged in critical reflection linked to peer-to-peer observations and as a team leader giving feedback to my staff. The work of Joyce and Showers (1996) outlined five-stages that need to be present for CPD to be effective. These stages require that new approaches are not only explained but justified (1. theory), then demonstrated (2. observation), practised (3), fed back upon (4) and discussed with a colleague (5).

It is likely that peer-to-peer observations...
also support the development of CoPs, rather than a ‘them and us’ culture between observer and observed. The IfL CPD list also includes mentoring. Since my first teaching role I have not had a mentor but research can proxy a mentor, encouraging the formulation questions to ask myself and so aiding my reflection on my practice. For example, reading Winter (2003) encouraged me to reflect on how I support my higher education students and formulate their assessments particularly as they are not traditional HE learners.

Research also puts me in the role of learner. Winter (2003 p12) comments about the ‘mysterious’ rules of essay writing and I can fully understand this as I struggle to develop this style of writing.

The funding of FE organisations has an impact on teachers’ practice and so I may be a ‘democratic’ teacher (Sachs, 2001 cited in Bathmaker and Avis, 2005, p6), but I think I can only maintain this by not teaching in one organisation full-time. I am able to maintain my values by working for a number of organisations, as this helps me to ‘stand outside’ my practice in each, by making comparisons, reflecting and maintaining perspective. I hope to develop this further and become a more reflexive-minded practitioner (Bolton, 2010). But as a natural multi-tasker, becoming reflexive will be a challenge.

Conclusions
IfL (2010) noted that, in order to support ‘brilliant’ teaching, innovation must be supported and that learning must be central to the organisation’s principles. But funding issues and their impact on management decisions may reduce flexibility by discouraging risk taking and innovation. As stated by Villeneuve-Smith et al (2009 p12), in order to deal with a ‘policy-rich environment’ up-skilling teachers is key (i.e dealing with ongoing change).

The FE sector is a complex one and the teachers within it are diverse (one of the strengths of the sector). Structuring qualifications to suit this is a challenge. The 2008 requirements had only just become established when they were removed. Whether they were appropriate and/or if they had any impact is open to debate (Lucas et al, 2012).

But the challenge of supporting FE teachers to develop still exists and encouraging trust in the reflective process (Bolton, 2010) so that it becomes a habit may be part of the answer and may also support the morale of the FE workforce (Brookfield, 1995). To do this they must see reflection as a pedagogical approach rooted in the ‘public and political’ (Bolton, 2010 p5). “General and subject pedagogic knowledge is a complex and interconnected one,” (Lucas et al, 2012 p689) and perhaps using reflection as a pedagogical approach might link the two more effectively.

The primary teacher I use as my metaphor is still central to my philosophy of good teaching. But the teaching environment is different today and the metaphors used by government and Ofsted to set targets and methods of measuring our performance are then interpreted by senior managers who influence classroom practice.

I love Bowman’s (1997) metaphor of learning and teaching as a journey and that teacher and student are travelling companions. I hope that being critically reflective will help me take ‘informed actions’ (Brookfield, 1995).

I have reflected in writing and have used Moon’s (2001) model of writing and rewriting to get different perspectives. Whether this approach produces academic style writing I am not sure. I think I have not written in the past because I wanted to write what is ‘true’. But what is true is relative: changing according to your perspective. I now plan to write into the unknown (Bolton, 2010).

References
- Coffield, F. (2009) All you ever wanted to know about learning and teaching but were too cool to ask. London: Learning and Skills Network.
A critical reflection on my own professional identity

By Jess Underhill

The developmental process that shapes a further education teacher is a continuous one and there is always more to learn about ourselves, students and the world around us.

Establishing one’s professional identity has been well researched within the realms of both developmental psychology and social psychology (Côté and Levine, 2002).

My aim in this article (see link to Jess’s full paper on page 22) is to critically reflect upon my own professional identity as a further education teacher and the developmental journey that has shaped this so far.

Simons (2013, p9) reports that “FE practitioners need to possess vast specialist knowledge of their fields,” however, “the professional identity of FE lecturers is characterised by their perception of themselves as professional educators rather than subject specialists,” (Wilson, 2013, p20).

This challenges an earlier culture where accepted teacher training for FE and the subsequent teacher identity was formed on subject expertise and vocational experience alone (Robson, 1998). It therefore seems fitting to incorporate both dimensions, as a teacher and as a subject specialist, in my own reflections.

Having spent several years as an outdoor professional, guiding and instructing, I feel that this took away some of the initial barriers I might have faced as a new teacher because I had, to some degree, been working within an educational environment for several years. Applying coaching theory from paddlesport (kayaking and canoeing) to the classroom has been one of the challenges that I have particularly enjoyed.

For me, teaching my lessons and being a tutor was the easy part initially: it allowed me to feel comfortable working in allegiance with my former occupational identity (Robson, 2008). I felt prepared in the contexts of subject specialist and teacher because I could draw upon my previous occupational experiences to inform my teaching (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009).

But Anhorn (2008) refers to the need for new teachers to have access to an adequate wider support network and it was this that I found most difficult during my initial year of teaching. It was Rushton and Suter’s (2012) third dimension of policy and context that I needed to seek the support network on which Anhorn places such great importance. I am now in my third year of full-time teaching in FE and feel that it is only now, having recognised the importance of the right question to the right person at the right time, that I have become comfortable and familiar with this dimension.
Although I now have QTLS, so am technically qualified, I see all of my current practice as part of the process to becoming a qualified professional in the lifelong learning sector.

It is recognised by many that the wider social circumstances of a teacher’s life has a dramatic impact upon their professional identity as a teacher (Jephcote and Salisbury, 2009, Day et al. 2006 and Larrivee, 2000). I felt that I had a strong professional identity within my former occupation as an outdoor professional and I wasn’t prepared for the way that FE teaching – largely because of policy – would challenge this.

“Sometimes... our beliefs are thrown into doubt without... prior deliberation on our part” (Kerdeman, 2004, in Dunne and Hogan, 2004, p45) and it could be argued that in this instance I was ‘pulled-up-short’. Although this was very much unexpected at the time, I now realise that this has allowed me to consider and engage with others’ perspectives and perceptions of me to allow me to be critical in my own reflections.

Sleegers & Keichtermans (1999) recognise that professional identity isn’t solely formed by reflections on teaching and personal life but also by the “interaction between the personal experiences of teachers and the social, cultural, and institutional environment in which they function on a daily basis,” (in Day et al. 2006 p603).

It is this interaction that has had the biggest impact upon my professional identity, forcing me to realise that, as a teacher, I will have a different professional identity to the one I held previously. It has also allowed me to recognise that my professional identity isn’t fixed and will continue to develop during my career.

On reflection, I feel that working with a teaching and learning coach when I was first appointed to post, only focused on me as a professional educator. Wilson’s (2013) primary indicator of professional identity. This part of the process neglected Rushton and Suter’s (2012) other two domains of policy and context and subject specialist.

The advice I received after my first formal observation neither reassured me nor filled me with confidence about the ‘policy and context’ domain. Simultaneously, it forced me to question my own understanding of the ‘teaching and learning’ domain. Rushton and Suter, (2012, p4) wrote: “Teaching and learning can be developed, and often improved, as a result of pondering, thinking and meditating on experience” and therefore, since feedback on my lesson was contradictory, I began to reflect more regularly upon my teaching.

Bolton (2001) recognises five key areas that reflective practice should enable us to realise and one such area is to “face problematic and painful episodes” (p14). It is only now that I can appreciate that this seemingly negative experience has allowed me to become a stronger person with a clearer professional identity and ultimately a better teacher with grade-one observations.

“Teaching and learning can be excellent ‘observable’ teaching skills but also the knowledge, values and beliefs that has shaped their practice” (Harper, 2013, p17). For me this just emphasises the importance of critical reflection and the importance of carrying values and beliefs as a part of professional identity.

Brookfield’s (1995, p1) opening statement, “we teach to change the world” is something I agree with and something I would argue shaped my identity in the outdoors and still shapes my identity within FE. There were a number of occasions where I have questioned if this is true of all my colleagues, as I’d assumed it was. I’ve found it difficult to accept that, in my experience so far, it is not. Initially, I felt very threatened by the numerous challenges my new life as an FE teacher placed upon my own personal and professional identity and I wanted to question the status quo. Having begun to learn ways of doing this I now no longer feel threatened but have accepted that a multiple identity, as an outdoor professional and an FE teacher, isn’t possible and I have had to modify my former identity as an outdoor professional.

Taking risks, considering multiple aspects and challenging one’s own assumptions are seen as essential elements of critical reflection (Brookfield, 2005, Beaty, 1997, Roffey-Barentsen and Malthouse 2009 and Larrivee, 2000 and Bolton, 2001). Larrivee (2000, p299) suggests that: “By challenging ourselves to create a new vantage point, teachers can assign new meaning to the classroom situations they confront.”

However, as Jephcote and Salisbury (2009) highlight, Larrivee’s (2000) statement isn’t wholly true: reflection does not just bring new meaning to my classroom but to me as a person. It is only now that I have recognised how much my professional identity has changed since I entered FE. Although I now have Qualified Teacher Learning and Skills (QTLS), so am technically qualified, I see all of my current practice as part of the process to becoming a qualified professional in the lifelong learning sector.

I intend to continue with autobiographical reflection and to develop my professional identity as I continue to experience more in teaching and the world in general. As Ghaye (Ghaye and Ghaye, 1998, p118) said: “Reflection on practice needs to be seen as a continuous process of knowledge construction.”

As a continuous process I do not intend to break it. I strongly believe that “there is always more to learn about yourself, your students and the complexity of the world in which we live” (Beaty, 1997, p7). As I am close to the end of one path, which path do I choose next?