When David Powell, director of the Education and Training Consortium, thinks of how the performance culture has changed further education, he thinks of his father. In 1992, David’s father, Dennis Powell, took over a course at Stafford College and recalls how there were 72 students at the start of the programme in September and just 36 by November. “Now he would have to be producing action plans all night to remedy that,” says his son.

Performance measures are seen as so important that it has led some observers to characterise today’s system as a transactional one, where achieving targets and delivering results for learners are paramount. “Performativity, the monitoring of performance, is like a signature tune that plays in the background of teachers’ lives. And you have to decide how you dance to that,” Powell says.

For many, like Powell, this transactional system can negatively influence the professional behaviours and practices of teachers and trainers by undermining their autonomy, and fostering a dependent culture. “If you don’t follow instructions in organisations now, you generally get yourself in trouble,” Powell says.

And what about the wider role of education in supporting social justice? Powell cites research by Paul Ayres, emeritus professor at the University of New South Wales, Australia, which shows the top one per cent of teachers are not exam-driven at all. “It was because they got the confidence, and they got that from being competent early on. You wouldn’t start off as a transformational educator. You become one,” says Powell.

That process of mastery faces a challenge from policy changes. As the curriculum will radically shift with the introduction of T levels and new apprenticeship standards, expert teachers and trainers need to refresh their knowledge. Powell describes it as withstanding “turbulence”.

Anita Collins, higher education leader in Skills for Life education at Leeds City College, says: “The biggest barrier is time, the time we have in the curriculum with learners. Being creative requires headspace.” Weekly teaching hours for full-time courses have dropped from 30 hours in the 1980s to 12.5 hours today.

Collins says there are examples of how teachers and trainers adapt to policy changes in a transformative way. She cites teachers using creative writing to make GCSE English resits more inspiring, or turning the obligatory promotion of British values into an opportunity to help foreign-born learners build cultural capital and gain a sense of belonging.

Simon Ashworth, chief policy officer of the Association of Employment and Learning Providers (AELP), says the switch to content-rich apprenticeships focused on knowledge, skills and behaviours is making the trainer’s role less transactional. “The role has morphed into a coach, teacher, trainer, as opposed to an assessor who does a bit of training,” he says.

But at the same time, work-based training now faces the same concerns of ‘teaching to the test’ as other parts of education.

Collective professional response
“Adaptability is crucial,” says Helen Pettifor, associate director of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Teaching isn’t necessarily about inspirational performances at the front of the class but about understanding the learner’s needs, she says. “If people are coming into your institution to do some off-the-job training for their job in BAE Systems, they don’t want to be treated in what could be quite a patronising way. They want to be heard when they say what they want,” Pettifor says.

In the second article in our series on professional behaviours, inTuition investigates the pressures on teachers and trainers, and how these may be helping to build greater professional adaptability and resilience. Joseph Lee reports

Cameron Law

The professional behaviours essential to thriving in a performance-driven culture, such as autonomy, creativity, adaptability and collaboration, are being put into practice in the Academic Resilience Model, an improvement process adopted by several schools and some FE colleges.

Josie Maitland, a PhD researcher at the University of Brighton, who is studying the impact of the model, says that it is based on seeing resilience as a collective professional response rather than as an individual quality of grit.

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