Analysing data on quality and financial viability, as well as ensuring that safeguarding and the Prevent agenda are embedded in our courses, is all very important.

But this emphasis on data, policy and processes does raise the question: where is the time and space for development, creativity and experimentation?

Three colleagues at the Workers’ Educational Association came together to explore this issue as part of a Research Development Fund project funded by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF).

Our initial findings were a bit predictable, if not a little dull. We could all pat ourselves on the back for having a good quality curriculum, with students achieving their goals and enjoying their learning experience.

But where was the development, creativity and experimentation?

It did not take us long to realise that data and processes are not designed to encourage inspirational teaching, but attempt to measure its shadow. As the research progressed, it also transpired that these measures could unintentionally militate against creativity.

Unlike some non-educational, private sector companies that invest in creative time for staff because they can see the benefits, it seems that staff working for further education and training providers are, generally, expected to be creative by default. Interviewing tutors and course organisers, we found that they were expected to work to a range of practice goals, policies and processes, and that these were unlikely to prompt creative approaches to teaching and learning.

So, we drew on Fielding et al (2005) and created the conditions for managers, course organisers and practitioners to meet as equals in a community of practice to discuss and influence curriculum design.

CREATIVE IDEAS

Initially, there was apprehension about relinquishing control. From a manager’s perspective it can be difficult to justify providing a space and time for staff to explore their practice, and to come up with creative ideas and solutions to problems. There always seem to be other deadlines, and staff capacity is always at a premium.

Tony Bulloch, the course organiser, was initially scared of losing control over planning. However, having embraced the ‘fear factor’, he began to relish achieving something for learners beyond the ordinary and expected.

For tutors, embracing this was quite exciting. In these communities of practice all were empowered as equals and, in those conditions, we were able to harness the professional experience of practitioners, capturing their ideas to create an inspirational curriculum offer.

Tutors already engage implicitly in curriculum planning by mutually negotiating the course content with students. But we found tutors engaging