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Unlocking the potential of Skills for Life (SfL) tutors and learners: a critical evaluation of the implementation of SfL policy in England

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Abstract

This paper uses data from interviews with eleven Skills for Life (SfL) practitioners in the North East of England to highlight how instruments for the implementation and evaluation of SfL policy are shaping practice at the local level. The paper concludes that the means being used to implement and evaluate the success of SfL policy are constraining practice in a number of ways which are not in line with the intentions of political or policy professionals. Such unintended consequences range from responses to SfL policy which simply frame practice in terms of outward imperatives of the market; through to technical-instrumental responses construed in terms of the simple acquisition of a set of pre-specified 'skills'; to other, more inwardly directed responses, premised upon concerns for the more holistic educational needs of learners.

Key words

Skills For Life; Performativity; Outcomes-Based Education, Social Practice.

Introduction

Under the New Labour government (1997-2010), levels of investment in education increased significantly. SfL, the first national policy for Adult Literacy, Language and Numeracy (ALLN) in England attracted unprecedented levels of funding (£2 billion) to an important, long neglected and under-resourced field of adult education. It raised the status of ALLN and set standards of professional qualifications for ALLN tutors. The same policy introduced standardised initial and diagnostic assessment instruments which aimed to bring greater rigour, coherence and structure to SfL practice. The National Core Curriculum (NCC) for the first time specified which aspects of literacy, language and number acquisition should be covered in ALLN programmes. SfL policy initiatives served not only to raise the importance, and increase the standing, of ALLN teaching and learning, but also took ALLN pedagogy beyond what were often well-intentioned but sometimes ad-hoc practices of the past, towards standards of professional knowledge and practice resembling those already expected of teachers in other sectors of education (Hamilton and Hillier, 2006). The same authors tracked chronological trajectories in the ALLN policy process from the 1970s up to the present SfL policy agenda and drew attention to the ways in which policy development and pedagogy in relation to ALLN in the UK have become increasingly over-simplified, micro-managed and framed almost solely in relation to economic imperatives and concerns.

This paper presents a critical evaluation of the implementation of SfL policy in England. The paper identifies the broad aims behind SfL policy and describes the implementation strategies that have been used to fund, manage, regulate and evaluate its 'delivery'. The impact of these methods of implementation upon local practice is explored in relation to the experience of practitioners working with and through these implementation mechanisms in the North East of England. Analysis of the interview data indicates that a compliance culture has come to preoccupy practitioners sometimes at the expense of alternative approaches to educational regulation and improvement. Such alternatives stand in stark contrast to top-down micro-managed regulation and improvement and are premised upon teachers, education managers and learners working together to arrive at practical, mutually understood, ways of improving learning in the light of local needs, circumstances and priorities. The paper points to pre-figurations of alternative approaches to SfL educational policy implementation, evaluation and improvement already in operation across Scotland which stand back from the micro-management of SfL delivery, reduce bureaucracy and free-up scarce resources. The paper concludes by suggesting that these alternative approaches to the implementation and evaluation of SfL policy and the improvement of educational practice may be of value to those interested in developing ideas and practices of the 'Big Society' in SfL and wider policy contexts.

Methodology

In the context of the above, this paper reports and examines the experience of SfL practitioners in the North East of England. The main data sources of this paper are drawn from eleven semi-structured interviews conducted with SfL teachers and education managers regarding their experiences of implementing SfL in the North East of England. While the research population for our study was to some extent based upon opportunity sampling, it was spread over three geographical areas and covered practitioners, managers and Teacher Educators working in Further Education (FE) colleges, Local Education Authorities and universities and ranged from those with long experience in the field to those recently qualified. The sample included one recently qualified full-time SfL practitioner working in an urban family literacy context, one highly experienced full-time SfL practitioner with over twenty-five years of experience of working in a semi rural area in both an FE college and Work Based Learning (WBL) settings, two SfL

managers working in an urban area who had previous extensive experience as teachers of adult literacy/numeracy, one SfL manager in a rural area with moderate practitioner experience, one senior SfL manager with relatively little experience as an SfL practitioner and two experienced SfL practitioner-Teacher Educators, responsible for Level 4/5 qualifications for teachers of adult literacy/numeracy. Interviews with each SfL practitioner/education manager lasted for approximately one hour. These were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. The information collected from transcripts was analysed for themes, differences, inter-relationships and other related factors. We compared and supplemented interview data with field notes and discussions about our everyday experiences as Teacher Educators working alongside SfL practitioners over a period of five years. Due to the relatively small-scale nature of this project we cannot claim that the findings of this study are representative of the larger population but they do suggest a number of themes worthy of further investigation in a broader context.

SfL policy and its implementation
The broad policy aim behind SfL policy has been to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of over seven million adults in England so that they are better able to play an active role in society and the economy (Moser et al, 1999; Leitch, 2006). This broad aim has, from the start, been expressed in terms of numbers and targets; for example, the setting of challenging national targets for the achievement of improvements in ALLN set centrally by UK policymakers and politicians. Since then, staff across the Lifelong Learning Sector (LLS) have worked extremely hard and dedicated considerable amounts of time, energy and resources to ensure that year-on-year SfL targets are met. One example shows from April 2001 until July 2005 over 69,000 people in the North East of England (NE) alone achieved one or more of the national qualifications that counted towards the Government's SfL Public Service Agreement targets for achievements in ALLN (DfES, 2006). What is perhaps most remarkable about this achievement is that despite over 10 years of formal compulsory schooling, for many of these adult learners, achieving this qualification was hugely significant because it was their first.

In the field of compulsory education, Morais and Neves (2001) and Teese and Polesel (2003a; 2003b) showed how top-down approaches to the implementation of education policy are increasingly pushing pedagogy towards compliance with externally set, centrally prescribed standards of performance or 'performativity' (Ball, 2003; 2004; 2010; Beck and Young, 2005). Bradley and Clegg (2006) revealed similar policy influences upon pedagogic practice in the field of Higher Education (HE) in England. Coffield (1999; 2002; 2009a; 2009b; 2010) extended the debate to include reforms in Post Compulsory education in the United Kingdom, while Wheelahan (2005) identified similar pushes towards compliance and performativity in systems of education in Canada and Australia. The work of the above authors illustrated the way in which pedagogy not only shapes education practice internationally but also frames what can and cannot be said, thought or enacted in particular educational contexts. SfL policy is implemented and evaluated by setting targets for achievement and the subsequent evaluation of performance against these targets. The instruments for setting targets and measuring outcomes include Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) informed by the National Core Curriculum (NCC). This approach to implementing SfL policy defines success almost exclusively in terms of the achievement of targets. In this way the means for evaluating SfL policy often becomes the priority over other educational concerns.

Elliott (2001) contended that while the virtue of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE), on the face of it, seem to be a matter of '*common sense*' and not open to question, such educational reforms actually rest upon some very questionable assumptions. Elliott argued that by specifying educational '*outcomes for all students*', which are then referred to as '*standards*' to be demonstrated as '*exit behaviours*',(pp. 556-558) which are then expressed as '*targets*' to be measured against benchmarks of attainment, the mechanisms for the predictable and pre-determined failure of models of OBE are effectively set in place.

Such educational reforms, claimed Elliott, saw the outcomes of teaching only as measurable outputs and render them as, not only predictable, but also amenable, to technical control by the teacher. Elliott illustrated how concerns with improving teaching then (simply) become a matter of increasing **technical control** over the production of increasingly predictable learning outcomes. The problem becomes further compounded when evaluations of the success of educational outcomes and benchmarks of achievement are measured in inelastic ways, regardless of context and contingencies.

The means we use to evaluate education are therefore not neutral in relation to the ends we wish to achieve because they contribute qualitatively to the very character of the ends they produce. That is why, Elliott (2001) argued, education is at heart more of a moral practice than a technological enterprise:

> '*In making a wise and intelligent response to the problem* [of pedagogy] *teachers need to base their teaching on evidence both about its* **original effectiveness** *and its* **ethical consistency** *with educational aims and procedures*' (original emphasis).

> (Elliott, 2001: p. 571)

Outcomes-based approaches to educational evaluation and improvement in SfL require central prescription, and encourage pre-occupations with target-led activity and vertical accountability which carry with them the high overheads associated with micromanaged regulation.

The current instruments framing the implementation and evaluation of SfL over-simplify and over-regulate practice and constrain the potential of teachers to innovate and improve teaching and learning of ALLN (Hamilton, 2009). Although the use of planning for individual learning is not new to ALLN, the introduction of the ILP is part of the recent drive towards uniformity in the implementation of SfL policy.

Hamilton argued that problems with current approaches to the implementation and evaluation of SfL policy are:
> '…*widely expressed as a crisis of time, the inability of the ILP to represent the diversity of student experience, their needs or their narratives about their experiences and progress and constrain what counts as learning…tutors take up an enforced position as broker or mediator between student needs and demands and system requirements. This translation work is demanding and involves a high level of engagement that involves constrained manoeuvres within a tightly controlled framework drawn up by experts external to practice allowing tutors to make only a limited range of procedural decisions.*'

(Hamilton, 2009: p. 225)

Hamilton's work contributes to a growing literature which demonstrates in several fields of social and public policy, including education, local government and medicine, and how government use of performance indicators and high stakes targets, in SfL and other public service reforms, may have costly, perverse and unexpected outcomes.

In contrast, a model has been adopted for the development of 'adult literacies' in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2009; 2010) in terms of the wider Lifelong Learning agenda which reflects the dynamic and diverse ways adults encounter and use words and numbers in written form. This approach recognises that literacy and numeracy are complex abilities rather than a simple set of basic skills and appreciates that learners are more likely to develop and retain knowledge skills and understanding if they see them as being relevant to their own context and everyday practices. From this perspective learning is seen as a *social practice* which takes account of the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which *adult literacies* are acquired and developed. Here the emphasis is upon how individuals and groups use literacy and numeracy in their daily lives. This approach is aligned with principles that underpin community learning and includes the empowerment of individuals and groups to influence factors that influence their lives, participation in decision-making inclusion and anti-discrimination, self determination in life choices and partnership working between agencies to maximise the effectiveness of provision. The outcomes of this approach are not limited solely to the improvement of reading, writing and using numbers but also recognise the difference learning can make to peoples' lives in terms of their confidence, self-esteem and an increased awareness of new personal, social, cultural, political and economic possibilities. The overarching principle here is that it is the learner at the heart of the learning process, not an ILP based on the putative existence and acquisition of a set of 'basic skills'. In summary, the literature indicates recurrent concerns about the implementation of SfL policy in England. It also signals the potential of alternative implementation models such as the Scottish model (albeit still in its early stages) where these concerns do not appear to be so prominent.

What the practitioners say about current forms of SFL policy implementation
This section of the paper uses data from interviews with SfL practitioners to illustrate some of the problems and shortcomings of the English model for the implementation and evaluation of SfL policy in more detail. Some SfL education managers in our study were clearly comfortable with the language and ethos of the market and the legitimacy of target-driven funding
> "*In terms of the product I think that the traditional basic skills product had been to a very large extent at entry level with occasional forays into Level 1 and 2. In order to deliver the kinds of targets we have been set and the wider drawn definition of Skills for Life people have had to reinvent those products and to design materials that took people at a much greater pace to the qualification Levels 1 and 2.*"

(Interviewee 02, FE College Manager)

> "*It's a bit like Galaxy milk chocolate in many different flavours…Education for us is in many different flavours, Entry Level, Level 1, Level 2, Literacy, Numeracy it is a range isn't it?…And the learners go shopping for these products don't they? It's just like a tin of beans…you can get a national test from us, or a national test from the college: it's just the product.*"

(Interviewee 08, Local Education Authority (LEA) Manager)

For these education managers, ALLN was simply a commodity to be packaged, marketed and sold to learners. From this perspective the identity of the tutor was framed very much in terms of a 'technician' whose job it is to 'fix' the literacy, language and numeracy 'deficits' of individual learners with the right 'product'.

The model of 'best practice' framed in SfL is based upon a particular understanding of the components of ALLN, the means of its acquisition, context and the relationship between all three. The 'skills' to be taught are taken to be generic or universal, in the sense of being effectively uncoupled from individual situation, biography and identity. The language and concepts of learning inherent in this model describe ALLN learning in terms of discrete *skills* which can be *audited* to identify and address *deficits* in the learner. The content of the NCC is used to frame a relatively narrow legitimate territory or horizons of learning in which the role of the tutor is seen to be to simply use the discrete and putatively universal skills underpinning the NCC, the 'Skills Audit' and the ILP to make the context of SfL provision relevant to the individual needs of the learner. Newman (2001) pointed to tensions between New Labour's emphasis on standardising practice though the installation of a model of 'best practice' and contrasted this with the need for practitioners to be able to respond to the needs of local learners in different contexts in very different ways (Coffield and Edward, 2009).

As we have seen, the ILP continues to be a hotly debated and contested aspect of SfL pedagogy. In SfL the ILP is drawn up in consultation with the learner. It sets out a clear set of targets for the learner to achieve within an agreed time frame. Reviewed at regular intervals, the plan is modified by the tutor in consultation with the learner to take into account individual achievement and changes in learning priorities. Progress and performance are measured by the tutor and the learner and also monitored by the quality assurance regimes of the funding and monitoring body and the provider. The ILP aims to ensure that individual needs are met and are seen to be met. The first factor guiding the shape of the ILP is a preliminary Skills Audit.[1] SfL tutors and managers interviewed in this small-scale study had very different views of these SfL policy instruments. One experienced practitioner noted:

> "In the past we were given more freedom and responsibility…the managers also worked they were practitioners. A manager would not now be a practitioner: some managers have forgotten what it was like to be a practitioner"
>
> (Interviewee 06, SfL Practitioner)

Some practitioners saw the ILP and the Skills Audit from a rational, perspective and considered it to be both necessary and unproblematic. Practitioners were often the more recently qualified and relatively less experienced SfL teachers in our sample or practitioners who had not come from 'up through the ranks' of ALLN practitioners over the years but who had entered this specialist field of adult education from backgrounds and subjects outside the area of ALLN. These practitioners tended to see the Skills Audit and the ILP simply in terms of standardising tools which gave a rational structure and consistency to their practice:

> "In this institution [college] we've always had learning plans and tried to structure the learning…but I think what it's done generally is to ensure that they know exactly which skills they are developing and what they are hoping to achieve by the end of the programme."
>
> (Interviewee 01, College Manager)

While some ALLN practitioners and education managers saw the ILP and the NCC as new and welcomed tools, helping to bring greater structure and consistency to SfL practice, others argued that they had always done things this way.

For other practitioners SfL policy instruments were deeply problematic and at odds with their professional values. The time-consuming nature of the bureaucratic paperwork and audit culture surrounding the ILP was also repeatedly referred to by the SfL practitioners and managers who participated in our study.

> "It has been very hard at times and not just about the accreditation and the qualifications, but about the paperwork that is expected. There is a lot of talk [in staff meetings] and sometimes dissent and rants 'Oh no not another piece of paper'. But [named colleague] will tell you one of my strengths has also been one of my weaknesses, which is democracy, discussion debate. I have never been the type of manager who has just said 'You have got to do it'; I have never just sent stuff round and said 'This is what you do'. There is usually a lot of talk that goes on."
>
> (Interviewee 10, SfL Manager)

Bureaucracy and the top-down micro-management of SfL appeared here to be creating tensions between traditions of democracy and concerns for the learner which have characterised ALLN in the UK. Some SfL managers clearly found this contrary to their professional values and were trying to bear the brunt of these in the interests of protecting their staff in order to enable them to get on with the 'real work'.

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[1].This two-part process begins with Initial Assessment screening which is designed to '*help identify an individual's skills against a level within the National Standards*' (DfES, 2001b:1) set out in the Core Curriculum. The learner sits a short written question and answer paper to identify a general level of proficiency. The next step, Diagnostic Assessment, then explores a set of proficiencies within that range. This challenges learners to explore the limits of their skills and in the process identify their existing literacy/numeracy skills (DfES, 2001b:15). The assessment process thereby generates for the learner and the tutor both a quantification of a general level of proficiency and a clearly identified set of developmental needs. These make a crucial contribution to the drawing up of the ILP.

"One of the things that everyone has to do is an Individual Learning Plan which is going to set down in neat bullet points exactly what you are doing well…yes you can do that but you have to approach them in much more holistic organic ways with many people But you need staff with a good background themselves to do that."

(Interviewee 04, SfL Practitioner)

Yet the time which needed to be spent getting to know people more holistically was not recognised in the funding regime; for example finding out about who they were, what they hoped to be and what they wanted to learn to be that way, was repeatedly cited as the most time-consuming but key aspect of the engagement of 'hard to reach' learners in the community with some of the most profound learning needs. Practitioners expressed concern that this crucial aspect of practice was not funded by SfL and represented not only a misunderstanding of the needs of many ALLN learners, but also a serious flaw in the SfL policy and funding regime.

It also appeared that the further away from the college-based model, the more creative teachers needed to be with the NCC and the ILP. This appeared to largely involve packaging the things learners wanted to learn up into a 'course' and mapping this back to the ILP and the Core Curriculum. An example is in one situation a tutor reported how she had to begin with the financial numeracy needs of the real life situation of a single mother in the clutches of a high street money lender. Her home was ransacked by the moneylender's operatives because she couldn't maintain her repayments. In order to attend to the identity and most pressing human needs of the learner, the tutor had to map the needs of this learner back to the core curriculum only after she was able put the learner in touch with a credit union.

While the ILP, like the Skills Audit, was seen positively by many tutors and managers, it also attracted criticism. Some saw the Skills Audit as a rational development which simply served to structure and *put into print* what good tutors had been doing for a long time. However, the bureaucracy and time-consuming nature of the ILP was sometimes criticised for taking time away from planning and supporting learning:

"I hate this new diagnostic tool because it reduces things and says "If you can prove they did it this time, then they have achieved that aim" but [the reality is] they need loads and loads of over learning."

(Interviewee 01, SfL Practitioner)

Here we can see evidence of how the ILP was pushing practitioners to thinly structure the context of the knowledge and learning to be acquired in becoming literate, determining the means of its acquisition and setting the parameters for its auditing potential in the recording and accounting of both learning and achievement.

Some interviewees recognised that while some practitioners valued the ILP and the NCC, this view was not shared by all practitioners:

"I think the model had been really successful and really been taken on board in the sense that it has given people a very clear idea of what they should be doing and how they should be doing it and I think its like a big power, you know a lot of power associated with it you know, being able to read the curriculum is being able to match up your materials with it…sort of specialist knowledge and I think that has been really popular."

(Interviewee 05, SfL Practitioner)

"Some people would disagree with the structural advantages of ILP and the NCC…there are one or two of my tutors would disagree and would say 'We put people in straightjackets. We have narrowed the curriculum."

(Interviewee 10, SfL Manager)

Interview data provided evidence to support the claims of Beck and Young (2005) that tutors and managers with more market 'projected' identities expressed less tension between market and target driven policy instruments, the NCC and their practice. The workloads of practitioners with more 'introjected' orientations towards the learner appeared to be increasing as they tried to balance the demands of the policy instruments of SfL with their professional values as ALLN teachers. The latter group tended to see the policy instruments of SfL operating to narrow down and distort the ALLN curriculum and as such represented a challenge to their professional values. An example of the influence of the impact of SfL policy instruments upon pedagogy can be found in the following interview extract from an interview with an adult numeracy teacher:

"When you're teaching towards a test sometimes in a very difficult time span, depending on where you're teaching and that makes perhaps bad teaching strategies perhaps not always looking for the best pedagogy but they're looking for the best way to help a learner to get through a test."

(Interviewee 03, SfL Practitioner)

The above comment helped to illustrate the tension between introjected and projected tutor identity. The drive to meet targets combined with SfL funding mechanisms appeared in our study to be pushing some managers and practitioners towards more market and target driven approaches to the teaching, learning and assessment in ALLN where the priority and the push was simply to get the paperwork right and to 'chase the target'.

We have already pointed out how, among others, Ball (2003; 2004) described this push toward performance, compliance and control with centrally driven, top-down approaches to policy implementation in terms of a kind of performativity where teachers were constantly required to justify their practice and conform to centrally prescribed standards and curricula. The central setting of ambitious targets, the linking of the achievement of these to funding, the regular auditing and inspection of the provision by the funding and monitoring body and the quality assurance systems of the providing institution, together with the empirical data from this small-scale study confirm a wider push towards performativity in policy implementation in England.

A further SfL policy instrument intended to guide the construction of the ILP is the "context" that the student brings (DfES, 2001: p. 19). Context here refers to a "set of priorities and requirements" that the learner identifies. We might think here of learners' requests to 'improve spelling', 'help with the children's homework', 'to acquire new vocational skills' or requests to develop skills in relation to employment, hobbies and interests. The NCC for ALLN states that the context learners bring '*must be the starting point*' for the development of their learning programme (DfES, 2001: p. 9). In the NCC, 'context' is used to mark the interests, individual priorities and vocational ambitions of the learner. The ILP is constructed when the skills profile produced by initial and diagnostic assessment is combined with the context that the learner brings. Hyland (1993) robustly contested claims that knowledge and the processes involved in its construction can or should be described in terms of 'skills'. Payne (2000) illustrated the chameleon-like nature of the concept of knowledge as 'skill' in the UK education policy discourse and highlighted the potentially damaging and distorting implications of this for Post Compulsory Education and Training. The notion of learning as 'skills' operates to reduce what is to be learned into a battery of discrete skills from which it could be argued tutor and learner identity and effect are effectively removed. SfL provision is assumed to meet the learner's needs because opportunities for the development of discrete skills are supposed to be embedded in SfL in ways that make them relevant and appropriate to the learner's more or less unique context. The use of centrally-prescribed NCC to set the context not only presents learning in terms of discrete skills but also transmits and prioritises the acquisition of thinly contextualised atomised skills for both the learner and the tutor.

Barton and Tusting (2005) pointed out such approaches to the development of language, literacy and numeracy but also overlook international examples of the failures of curriculum-based literacy programmes that presented learners with irrelevant content and remained isolated from the realities of their immediate existence. They argued that such models neither encourage discussion of learners' immediate experiences and their current social political and economic conditions nor do such pedagogical approaches develop opportunities and initiatives though which these might be transformed and improved. Echoing Dewey, the same authors were also critical of thinly embedded literacy interventions prominent of the 1970s to the 1990s which combined notions of literacy with livelihoods and shaped literacy development in the neo-liberal, functional and work oriented terms of human resource development and economic productivity. This 'thin' notion of context in SfL, when coupled to the notion of the existence of discrete skills, presents a particularly narrow picture of the learner and the way in which ALLN is to be taught, learned and assessed.

Some tutors and managers in our study detected this and were critical of the 'thin' context and implicit deficit image of the learner in the SfL model of 'best practice'. One manager commented:
> "*I think the thing that is starting to permeate from the Skills for Life approach but it hasn't been explicit enough for me is…'Will you stop concentrating on what people can't do and concentrate on the skills they want to accredit in much the same way that you would for other kinds of education'…There is no other bit of education where you start by saying there is a deficit.*"

(ZB 02 College Manager)

For some practitioners the use of the basic skills tests was seen as striking at the heart of the values of ALLN and this was the most widely contested area of the strategy. The 'flawed' nature of such tests is documented in the literature (see, for example, Lavender, Derrick and Brooks, 2004). The policy instruments of SfL together with a supporting training programme were designed to encourage basic skills teachers to use these instruments in their practice. A combination of target driven financial incentives, curriculum resources, rules, regulations, and penalties served to further reinforce this message and despite considerable practitioner resistance have served to embed testing in ALLN practice. In terms of context in SfL, Barton's critique discussed earlier seems to be well founded. SfL policy instruments appear be pushing SfL practice in ways which do not reach goals for an inclusive and democratic education system.

The system for implementing and evaluating SfL policy is not encouraging teachers, education managers and learners to productively experience boundaries and tension points between past and future lives and the social,

cultural, economic and political contexts in which those lives are lived. It is encouraging them to comply with the system. Instead of encouraging discussion of learners' current social, political, cultural and economic conditions and the development of initiatives through which these might be transformed and improved, the SfL model of 'best practice' reduces learner identity and context to a deficit-model; learners are required to perform and comply with standards and activities externally prescribed by others. The push towards compliance and commodification in the SfL model of 'best practice' appears to be taking place in a context isolated from the identities and realities of learners' immediate existence and (in some cases) this is having less than optimal influences upon teacher and manager identity and pedagogy. The narrow framing of context in the current model of 'best practice' appears to be empirically and socially empty for many practitioners who spent considerable amounts of time and energy trying to enrich learners experiences of SfL by trying to make context more relevant to the social, economic and political conditions in which learners found themselves.

Fairness, freedom and responsibility: SfL in the 'Big Society'

Bernstein (1996) cautioned that systems of education based upon the assumption that the acquisition and structuring of knowledge is made up of a battery of discrete generic skills in which learners can be 'trained' would lead to surface short-term, instrumental learning and a legacy of low learner autonomy: a state of citizenship far removed from the values and ambitions of the 'Big Society' proposed by the coalition government.

The new coalition government has premised its outline programme for a fixed term of five years upon the principles of Freedom, Fairness and Responsibility. How these will translate into policy is still unfolding against a backdrop of significant public spending cuts, with more on the way in the forthcoming autumn spending review. The coalition has already demonstrated a strong commitment to reducing bureaucracy and regulation and increasing operational freedoms in the public sector. Ministers are urging the LSS to identify where greater freedoms should be granted. There is a clear opportunity for the sector to shape and take greater control over its oversight and regulatory arrangements.

A key political lesson from the past 20 years is that we cannot rely on regulation as a way of ensuring that we do the right thing. Sennett (2008) pointed out that most of us want to do a good job and do not just want to 'get by' but get better at what we do because we find it intrinsically rewarding to do our best and to be recognised as having done so. For Sennett, rule books, regulations and information technology cannot replace good judgements, characterised by human beings making good sense and taking good decisions in a wide range of complicated and uncertain situations.

The challenge before the sector now is to respond to the opportunities presented in the 'Big Society' agenda to open up a 'democratic discursive space' where SfL policy makers and practitioners in England can share their knowledge to improve both SfL policy and practice. Many policy problems are now '*too complicated, too contested and too unstable to allow for schematic, centralised regulation*' (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003: p. 7).There is never enough knowledge and there never will be enough time to make the perfect policy decision but as Scott (1999) and Keep (2006) have pointed out, unless the state manages to find new ways of working and sharing power with those expected to implement its policies it is likely that it will find itself locked in a system of state control where the high costs and overheads of supervising unintended, ineffective and inefficient outcomes of public service policy will ultimately outweigh any potential benefits of those policies to its citizens and tax payers.

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