excerpt from Agents of change? Tutors managing learner identities in lifelong learning

by Mary Hamilton

▬ Ten years on, the reality of what Skills for Life [in England and Northern Ireland] has meant for adult learners and for teachers in the field is becoming clear. A growing body of data has documented the development of Skills for Life and the wider reforms of the Learning Skills Sector within which it is embedded (Hodgson et al; Barton et al.; Miller et al.; Appleby and Bathmaker). The number of learners involved has increased substantially from 300,000 in 1996 to more than 1.5 million in 2007. However, quantitative data from policy evaluation studies demonstrate how the ambitious Level 2 targets have resulted in substantial "mission drift" by skewing recruitment in favour of younger students already in full-time education or training and those with higher starting levels and easily identifiable vocational goals who are able to move more easily and quickly through the national test (Bathmaker; House of Commons Public Audit committee 2005).

The process of squeezing students' aspirations into the tick-boxes of funding bodies, finding a balance between standardization and responding to diversity, is a demanding one that many tutors engage with, despite their misgivings, in order to enable people to access and progress through programs. Everyday paperwork is a crucial link, entangling tutors in a range of interlocking processes of sorting and sifting learners. Skills for Life standardizes learner identity through the use of artifacts such as diagnostic tests and (ironically) Individual Learning Plans, which are used to translate learners' goals into "SMART" targets, indexed to curriculum elements. Tutors mediate these processes acting as brokers, advocates and gatekeepers. They transmit curriculum goals and organize the time and pace of learning within review periods (Burgess). They manage and induct reluctant learners. They prepare students for multiple-choice literacy tests and then administer the tests themselves, failing or passing students on the basis of specific testing performances, selecting and sorting bodies and their achievements and selecting and filtering the relevant learning from the irrelevant. They do all this within the context of the high-stakes audit-and-target culture outlined above and with a

sense that the paperwork is somehow a distraction from the "real work" of teaching.

While the authors of the Skills for Life framework and curriculum do not see them as templates to be mechanistically applied, the fact is that working terms and conditions and opportunities for training affect tutors' room to manoeuvre and their ability to adapt the framework to local circumstances. Although it is possible to adapt reductive frameworks to alternative or more holistic approaches to teaching and learning, only very experienced and committed teachers are able to articulate a personally held vision of their work with the official discourse in order to achieve what they would see as an authentic pedagogy (Webb)....

...The fact that most tutors are still part time, are dispersed across many different institutional contexts and have uneven access to professional development opportunities means that it remains difficult to consolidate a sense of professional group identity and policy involvement. There is a lack of formal networks and associations through which practitioners could make representative contributions to new developments.

Public spaces for deliberative, reflexive communication among interested parties are still scarce (and, some have argued, have reduced under New Labour, except at the level of micro-decision-making) and the speed of policy change makes it hard to respond to, even when consultation (typically of a highly structured kind) is offered. The result of this is a widespread feeling among practitioners that policy is something that happens to them, initiated from some faraway place, and that the gap between policy and the consequence in practice is wide and unperceived by policy-makers themselves (Edwards et al.).

In summary, over time, the lifelong learning agenda that was initially part of the Skills for Life strategy has dropped away. It has been overtaken by a narrower vision, that of literacy and numeracy and language as vocational skills. Lifelong learning has proved to be too expensive, too slow and too open to learner direction to be sustained under the conditions of the policy regime described above. Tutors mediating between everyday practice and this

"command and control" policy environment are left to manage diverse student identities within local contexts where recurrent tensions surface.

The Skills for Life strategy has normalized a standardized learner identity and has recast the professional identity of the teacher as technical expert, whose job it is to apply formulaic methods of translation between learner diversity and a standardized curriculum, managing learner identities in ways that are acceptable to funding and auditing bodies. This analysis is consistent with that found by recent research exploring the effects of policy on learning and inclusion in the Learning Skills sector more generally. For example, Finlay documents the effects of continual change and the heavy demands of performativity as teachers try to navigate the "waves of policy" (Hodgson et al.)....

[W]hile the Skills for Life strategy may have expanded provision and public awareness of adult literacy, numeracy and ESOL, it has done so at the expense of both tutor and learner agency in the pedagogical process, reducing the space for professional judgment, negotiation and decision-making. Nonetheless, tutors are still–inevitably–enrolled as active agents in change, through the mediating role they play in managing student identities and progress minute by minute

through the lifelong learning infrastructure. This constrained agency is experienced by some tutors, especially those new to the field, more in terms of paperwork overload and contradictory demands than as a reduction in professional autonomy. Many experienced tutors, however, recognize the reduction in agency acutely and interpret it as a real ethical undermining of their role, which traditionally has been characterized by large amounts of "gift-time," a pride in making the most of resources in a marginalized field and a bedrock commitment to social justice and the human rights of learners. ∎

MARY HAMILTON is Professor of Adult Learning and Literacy in the Centre for the Study of Education and Training (CSET) within the Department of Educational Research and the Lancaster Literacy Research Centre at the University of Lancaster. She is a founding member of Research and Practice in Adult Literacy (RaPAL) and a core member of the Lancaster Literacy Research Group. This paper was presented at the 38th Annual SCUTREA Conference, 2-4 July 2008, University of Edinburgh. SCUTREA is the Standing Conference on University Teaching and Research on the Education of Adults. The paper is available online at www.leeds.ac.uk/ educol/documents/172362.pdf.

SOURCES:

Appleby, Yvon and Ann-Marie Bathmaker (2006). The New Skills Agenda: Increased Lifelong Learning or New Sites of Inequality? *British Educational Research Journal* 32 (5), 703-717(15).

Bathmaker, Ann-Marie (2007). The Impact of *Skills for Life* on Adult Basic Skills in England: How Should we Interpret Trends in Participation and Achievement? *International Journal of Lifelong Education* 26 (3), 295–313.

Burgess, Amy (2008). The Literacy Practices of Recording Achievement: How a Text Mediates Between the Local and the Global. *Journal of Education Policy*, 23 (1), 49-62.

Edward, Sheila, Frank Coffield, Richard Steer and Maggie Gregson (2007). Endless Change in the Learning and Skills Sector: The Impact on Teaching Staff. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 59 (2), 155-173.

Finlay Ian, Sheila Edward and Richard Steer (2007). The Impact of Policy on the English Learning Skills Sector. Special Issue of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, 59 (2).

Hodgson, Ann, Sheila Edward and Maggie Gregson (2007). Riding the Waves of Policy? The case of Basic Skills in Adult and Community Learning in England. *Journal of Vocational Education and Training* 59 (2), 213-229.

House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 21st Report Session 2005-6, Available at www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506/cmselect/cmpubacc/792/79202.htm House of Commons Public Audit committee.

Miller, Kate, June Smith, James Carmichael and Richard Edwards (2007). Researching Literacy for Learning in the Vocational Curriculum. In Michael Osborne, Muir Houston and Nuala Toman (eds.), *The Pedagogy of Lifelong Learning: Understanding Effective Teaching and Learning in Diverse Contexts.* London: Routledge, 79-89.

Webb, P. Taylor (2006). The Choreography of Accountability. *Journal of Education Policy* 21 (2), 201-214.