LEARNING

Transformative teaching and learning: a lesson for the future

In a climate of tight FE funding and cuts that can obstruct students, a research project aimed at transforming lives and communities focuses on learners’ interests, with care at its core.

Dr Vicky Duckworth and Dr Rob Smith

Over the past 18 months, the Further Education in England: Transforming Lives and Communities research project, funded by the University and College Union (UCU), has gathered evidence about transformative teaching and learning (TTL) from more than 30 colleges and their communities across the UK (Duckworth and Smith 2017a & 2017b). TTL is a lens for exploring teaching and learning in further education settings that puts learners’ teaching and learning in further & 2017b). TTL is a lens for exploring the UK (Duckworth and Smith 2017a & 2017b). TTL is a lens for exploring teaching and learning in further education settings that puts learners’ teaching and learning in further education settings that puts learners’ teaching and learning in further education settings. TTL relies on institutions and individual teachers working together to ensure that teaching and learning is freed from these reductive and damaging constraints, so that the full transformative potential of the further education experience can be realised.

What are the key findings of the research?

Our research reveals that TTL means different things for different learners. We can illustrate this by referring to two case study participants. For Adam, TTL meant moving forward after a negative experience at school. “I felt like a nobody and not listened to... I just took it lying down.” Further education for Adam meant discovering that he could succeed at learning and he could connect that achievement to plans for his future. He described how the teachers on his college course spoke to him in a different way. Adam’s sense of being ‘dumb’ and ignored, which was, in his mind, connected to teachers’ labelling him as coming from a particular estate with a ‘reputation’, was replaced with a relationship in which he was able to take responsibility for his learning and establish a new, positive, learner identity. Importantly, our research also maps TTL as a broader social benefit. Adam’s mother described the relief she felt at no longer receiving phone calls every day and sometimes having to leave work to pick him up from school. Anxieties were replaced with pride.

For Claire, TTL was different but equally profound. Returning to an Access course opened my eyes to a different world. She spoke of the power she experienced in the classroom through simply being listened to and how that educational space became a springboard for her entry into the world as someone with more self-confidence who was empowered and assertive. From there Claire went on to become a qualified teacher. “I’m not the same. I used to think men do this and women do that. Now I know that’s not how it needs to be.”

Claire’s account illustrates some important attributes of transformative learning environments. Central in these is the sense that participants have of not being ‘judged’ and of being accepted for who you are. The research highlighted how by experiencing success, learners have the capacity to act as role models and raise aspirations and hope.

So what does this mean for teachers in further education?

The TTL lens connects with the Professional Standards for Teachers and Trainers in Education and Training in several ways. TTL challenges teachers’ theoretical understanding of what constitutes effective practice. It illuminates how the real barriers to effective practice may be related to ‘bumps on seats’ cultures (Duckworth and Smith 2018A, 2018B). It allows us to see that quality assurance mechanisms that emphasise reflection and achievement may actually interfere with transformative learning. It shifts the focus on what constitutes effective practice away from a technical means of delivering a body of knowledge and towards approaches that respond positively to the cultural dimensions that students bring with them.

This means that teachers can focus on establishing and sustaining the empowering, dialogic relationships with students that are founded on knowing them, understanding their backgrounds and, through that, communicating their belief in them as learners.

TTL requires curriculum space, not just within the classroom but in terms of the management of time. One clear principle relates to student motivation: an investment of time is essential at the beginning of any course that focuses on the classroom as a social learning environment, and that works to provide a bridge between students’ lives and curriculum. Ultimately, TTL is about shifting to more empowered models of curriculum based on a college-wide ethos that reconnects with the holistic purposes of further education.

For more information visit the project’s website at goo.gl/DTARra

You can also follow the project on Twitter @BETTransforms

References


Dr Vicky Duckworth is a reader in education at Edge Hill University. Her research is driven by practice, adult education, literacy, social justice and equity.

Dr Rob Smith is a reader in education at Birmingham City University. His work explores the impact of funding and marketisation on further and higher education.

Dr Jim Crawley is a writer and speaker on teaching in the University sector. He has been teaching and training teachers in FE for more than 35 years. His PhD research examined the professional situation of teacher educators in the FE and Training sector.

Why a pedagogy of teacher education is so important

By Dr Jim Crawley

When I carried out research into the professional situation of teacher educators in the sector from 2009 to 2014, I felt it was essential to consider teacher education pedagogy as teacher educators perceived and experienced it, because it is impossible to teach others how to teach without at least considering aspects of the method and practice, or pedagogy, of education.

Research by Clove and Harkin (2009), Cochran-Smith (2003, Harkin et al. (2008), Korthagen et al. (2005) and Lucas and Nasta (2010) all supported the notion that pedagogical principles were important to the professional values and identities of teacher educators, and indeed teachers in general.

Using focus groups, a discussion on a training course (totalling 135 participants) and a survey completed by 161 (still the largest survey of this group undertaken), I asked a range of questions, some of which were designed to collect views and perceptions about teacher education pedagogical principles and values.

I then devised a set of five key pedagogical principles in teacher education which reflected the results. They are:

1. Teacher education has a moral role in the development of inclusivity, reflective practice and social justice through teaching.
2. Teacher education models people through ‘golden moments’, perspectives, ideas and situations to help teachers reflect on, and develop, their own perspectives and perceptions of teaching and professional identity.
3. The process is a gradual agreement around the place of learning theory in teacher education, but this group of TCLs mainly supported experiential and student-centred theories.
4. Developing learning communities of reflection with their trainers, and connecting theory, practice and the workplace through these communities are a high priority.
5. The operating environment of FE and training has features recognisable in Schön’s (1983) model of the ‘swampy lowlands’, and mediating the effects of this environment is a further pedagogical priority.

Although important to teacher education, it is possible to test out any and all of the TCLs on the basic curriculum and how it is organised, supported and taught using these pedagogical principles devised from teacher education. Try it out.

Resources

• Jims MESH Guide on FE and training teacher education pedagogy is available here goo.gl/B7Y3axt.

Dr Jim Crawley is the key contact for the Teacher Education and Training in Lifelong Learning (TELL) research network. They have four regional meetings a year with the TELL network.