

Sample and contents list for teachers

Making the Difference

as a Teacher

in FE and the Life Long Learning Sector

electronic text

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chapters updated individually thereafter – latest version noted on each



Contents

These are live on the main site – you just click on the chapter title to open or download the text.

1 – What is FE, and why?

- encompassing the sector – the dynamics that shaped FE – a potted history of industry's relation to education and FE's role – professionalism in FE - conclusions – acts and agencies 2004-9 - sources and resources

2 – The clients for FE, and how we relate to them

- a natural market? - pre-16 – mature students – de-schooling and commodification – androgogy - the previously excluded – the social mix - sources and resources

3 – Differences and how to respond to them

- differentiation and significant differences – previous experience – discovery learning – advanced organisers – readability measures – learning styles and metacognition – gender – support needs – cultural and socio-economic differences - confidence and self-esteem (Bloom) - choosing techniques – update on personalised learning - sources and resources

4 – Skills and metacognition

- what should be questioned? – transient, enduring, transferable, basic, key, functional – employability – an educated mind? – thinking and learning skills – writing frames - evidence of learning – formative assessment – ipsatic referencing – medium and message - sources and resources

5 – Behaviour – theirs and yours

- levels of response - what is unacceptable? – defining the problem – diet and behaviour – Maslow – labels and syndromes (EBD/ESBD,ASN, ALN, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD, Asperger's, Autism, Tourette's) - motivation and persona - managing the context and energy levels – disciplinary systems - sources and resources

6 – Tutorials and transition, paperwork and reality

- our ends in our beginnings – why bureaucracy should be taken seriously - added value and distance travelled – CATS and SATS – sharing data – why tutorials – tutoring skills – motivational interviewing - self assessment – questioning methods - the stages of change - sources and resources

7 - Equal opportunities

- conceptualising equality and fairness – what is reasonable? – balancing needs in diverse microcosms - sources and resources

Bibliography with links for downloading.

materials annexes:

- 1 – levels and stages
- 2 – introducing learning styles
- 3 – plagiarism
- 4 - sample study skills

Extract from Chapter 3

Sherry Turkle is professor at MIT and author of *The Second Self: computers and the human spirit*. She took her 14 year old daughter to see an exhibition on Darwinism which included live turtles. One was very still and the other even less than active, in dirty water. Her daughter decided a robot would be better and other children in the queue agreed - "For what the turtles do, you don't have to have the live ones".

-*London Review of Books*, Diary,
page 36, Vol 28 Number 8 20th April 2006).

Can that be applied to teachers?

It is stating the obvious to insist that students are different to each other in various ways, and that any of those differences might affect the way they learn. To apply that glaringly obvious statement to your teaching, you need to decide

- what kinds of differences matter
- how you get to know about them
- what they imply for your teaching methods and
- what you can realistically do about it.

'Differentiation' is a good example of a simple idea rendered complex by the number of ways it has been misrepresented. It is sometimes seen as something new, even as a passing fashion, when in fact the idea behind it has always been basic to good teaching. It is also particularly difficult to achieve in the FE context.

Before we spoke of 'differentiation' there was the term 'inclusive learning'. That was misunderstood in two ways. One of the arguments was about including in mainstream classes students with various kinds of physical disability or learning difficulties, a process that could be seen either as a socially responsible act or an unfair demand on staff. That particular issue is dealt with in chapter 7. For now, we need to focus on the second kind of misunderstanding, which is more general.

The client base for FE expanded and new students appeared who had more difficulty with written and theoretical work. As the FE system became more inclusive socially, it started to cater for groups who had traditionally avoided it, including the unemployed and those who, to some staff, seemed unemployable. Because unskilled jobs were becoming more difficult to obtain, there was an increase of young students who had done badly at school, had often not attended well, and may even have been moved to Pupil Referral Units (PRU) or other non-school schemes. Instead of refusing them entry, the system was asked to take them in and make them employable. It was to be more inclusive in that social sense and had to learn how to teach people with fewer study skills and more negative attitudes to learning. Some teachers felt this social role was justified, and tried to rise to it, but many also found they had been asked to teach groups they could not cope with, as their previous experience did not prepare them for it. "This wasn't why I came into FE" was a common complaint, and 'inclusivity' was sometimes seen as an imposition, an unfair demand on the workforce.

But, in the classroom context, there had always been students who could not cope with the demands of the course. Many did not know how to learn, how to respond to the kinds of teaching that were available. Drop out and failure rates were high. It was increasingly argued that they were excluded from the learning process because the way they were taught did not suit them – too much teacher-talk that they couldn't cope with and too much written work without adequate support. In that sense, inclusive learning meant teaching in such a way that every student in the class was included in the learning process. It was a matter of varying techniques to serve better that element of the traditional student body who did not normally succeed. Achieving this aim required some thinking about how we taught, and some new ideas to become more flexible. Instead of blaming students for failing, we had to blame ourselves to failing them.

It was in this context that FE started to talk about the differences between students. Differentiation can be explained as the means to **reduce barriers to learning** by managing the process to allow for **significant differences**.

There are three ways in which a teacher might come across 'differentiation' in practice.

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Extract from Chapter 4

Thinking involves self-monitoring; dialogue involves critique and respectful disagreement. The ability to master both is a definition of educated discourse. How does a student learn to engage in educated discourse with a teacher?

The ability to learn is more than a set of cognitive skills. It requires the willingness to develop those skills and the intention to deploy them. Learning is an emotional experience. Moreover, the term 'skills' has become so widely used in so many ways that it is in danger of turning into Nasruddin's donkey.

The story concerns a crafty smuggler who, every week passed by a customs post with his donkeys laden with various goods. The officials knew he was smuggling, and they delved deeply into his panniers to find out what. They could see nothing illegal and had to let him go. This continued for many months, until he announced he had made so much money he was going to retire. Desperate, the officials who had searched him so many times begged

to be told what it was he had so cleverly smuggled under their very noses. “Donkeys”, he told them. Sometimes it is the very obvious that needs to be examined.

In a general FE college, and increasingly in sixth form colleges, the context for learning tends to be broadly vocational.

We agree with Sir Andrew Foster that the key strategic role for the sector, the role in which the contribution of FE to learners' lives, to society and the economy can exceed that of any other part of the education and training system, is to help people gain the skills and qualifications for employability, so that they are equipped for productive, sustainable and fulfilling employment in a modern economy.

- DfES (2006) 2.4

The key term in that paragraph is ‘fulfilling’. There is more to education than the need for employment. There is more to employment than the need to earn money. Both, however, are usually required to empower students.

Chapter 2 outlined the way that clients for FE may be defined and how its role is changing. A great deal of the argument about purpose is informed by notions of ‘skill’. There are said to be skills that are ‘basic’ or ‘key’ skills which every student must have in order to be fit for the employment market. There is much loose talk about employability skills and, in a poll of CBI members in 2005, it seemed that 41% of them were concerned at the lack of English or Maths skills among applicants and the same number were concerned with their “attitude to work”, whilst 72% were unimpressed with “their business awareness” (n1). Richard Lambert, taking over as director general of the CBI, told a reception at the House of Commons in 2006 that The UK was still “woefully short of world class skills” with “a shocking proportion” leaving school without the “basic literacy and numeracy skills needed by business.” His predecessor, Digby Jones was of the opinion that half of all school leavers were unfit to enter the job market. But what does all that actually mean, and what are such expressions of concern really worth?

The National Literacy Trust (<http://www.literacytrust.org.uk>) has a number of provocative statements online, including:

Up to 16 million adults - nearly half the workforce - are holding down jobs despite having the reading and writing skills expected of children leaving primary school.

(Source –The Public Accounts Committee report Skills for Life: improving adult literacy and numeracy. available at- www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200506)

The number of jobs classified as elementary and operative has fallen from 30% of total employment in 1981 to 23% in 1998. Forecasts suggest that by 2009, 40% of jobs will fall into the managerial, professional and associate professional categories, with only 21% in elementary and operative jobs.

In 1979, just over one half of the workforce held some form of formal qualification compared to almost nine out of 10 in 2000. The proportion holding a qualification at Level 3 or above has risen

It has been estimated that between 65% and 70% of employment opportunities will require a Level 3 qualification by 2010. Only 41% of UK 25 to 28-year-olds held

such qualifications in 1998. Of 19 to 21-year-olds, the figure was 43%.

(Source: Skills for all: Proposals for a National Skills Agenda, Final report of National Task Force, DfEE, 2000)

Poor basic skills cost UK industry more than £4.8 billion a year. It costs every company employing more than 50 employees £165,000 every year in poor quality control, lost orders and poor communication. The average company employing 1,000 people or more could save £500 per person if the basic skills of employees were improved.

(Source: Basic Skills Agency, 1993)

The employer's perspective

Interviewed by FET&C in 2005 about what makes people employable, an estate agent talked about morality. Although he required a certain degree of literacy and numeracy from his employees, his greatest worry was that they didn't seem to enjoy it. They worked only for money, not for the pleasure of doing a job well. Having spent the money, they were left unsatisfied. His problem was not with a lack of basic skills but with a merely instrumental attitude to work. He imagined many people swapping vocational sectors throughout a working lifetime, seeking the right kind of satisfaction.

A senior executive in a sector skills council, asked the same question also emphasised the need to 'engage' with work, to have a 'positive attitude' and be 'willing to take part', to be 'motivated' and 'persistent'. The lack of such qualities had nothing to do with level of qualification, and was missing from graduates as often as from unqualified school leavers.

A builder, willing to take on an apprentice and teach them on the job, found it difficult to hire one that was willing to turn up every day on time.

Visited by a member of the LEA, a travel agent complained that her new employee lacked "numeracy skills". By this she meant that the young girl had booked someone's holiday on the wrong date.

Travelling between colleges late at night, looking for a hotel in heavy rain, I recently became lost and tired within a mile of the destination. The map provided by the hotel's web site was not clear. I rang reception, told them where I was and asked how to get to the hotel. They offered to tell me the route from the M1. I explained that I was not on the M1 but very much closer. They started to read out the route from the M1. Who was lacking what kind of skill here? How could a previous teacher have avoided the problem?

One useful distinction circulating at present is between three kinds of skill (n2).

Transient skills are very specific and useful for a while. They would include the ability to use a particular software package. Quite soon, that