

Rolling out ‘good’, ‘best’ and ‘excellent’ practice. What next? Perfect practice?

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The identification and dissemination of ‘good practice’ has for years been a central part of the Government’s strategy for radical change of the education system. ‘Good practice’, however, is no longer good enough, nor is ‘best practice’. The requirement now for post-compulsory education and training (from which all our examples are taken) is nothing less than ‘excellent practice for all’. This article critically examines these highly significant shifts in the rhetoric of policy, finds them wanting and argues that we need to face up to the complexities involved in deciding not only what is ‘excellent practice’ but also in working through all the stages which would be needed to transmit it throughout the sector. In particular, recent documents from the Quality Improvement Agency and the Learning and Skills Council on the pursuit of excellence are critically appraised. The views of those practitioners who are part of the authors’ project in the Economic and Social Research Council’s Teaching and Learning Research Programme are also explained in relation to ‘good practice’. The authors attempt to explain the frenetic activity of politicians and policy makers in this sector, and end by moving from critique to construction by considering what can be rescued from the inherently contestable notion of ‘good practice’, and, in doing so, draw heavily on the work of Robin Alexander.

Leave Truth to the police and us; we know the Good; we build the perfect city time
shall never alter. (W. H. Auden)

Introduction

The ‘Champion of the Agenda for Change’ at the Learning and Skills Council (LSC),¹ who is a seconded further education principal, described recently how he was spending much of his time visiting further education colleges and private training providers up and down the country ‘looking at best practice and publicising it’ (Dowd, 2006). That statement prompts the following questions: how does he know that what he looks at *is* best practice? What criteria or norms is he using to make these judgements? How does he deal with the immense diversity and complexity of local contexts? Will best practice be used by other tutors just because it

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has been so labelled and publicised? And what are the implications for the quality of teaching and learning in colleges if he is wrong?

The identification and dissemination of ‘good’, ‘best’, or ‘effective’ practice are not minor, technical matters, but a central part of the Government’s strategy ‘to radically change the whole of the post-16 landscape’ (Rammell & Haysom, 2006, p. 2). These three adjectives are used interchangeably in official texts, although one might have expected a qualitative difference between ‘good’ and ‘best’ practice; after all, did not Voltaire argue that the best is the enemy of the good?

In England centrally determined policy seeks to ‘drive’ the improvement of teaching and learning in the post-compulsory sector. Hence the stream of policies and initiatives from the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) which aim to put ‘teaching, training and learning at the heart of what we do by establishing a new Standards Unit to identify and disseminate best practice’ (DfES, 2002, p. 5). Our research project on the impact of policy on learning and inclusion in the post-compulsory sector² suggests that perhaps the reverse approach should at least be considered: the processes of teaching and learning are the heart of the enterprise and should therefore be a major influence on policy. The main mission of the sector, *pace* the Foster Report (2005)³ and the White Paper on Further Education (FE) (2006),⁴ is *not* employability, which proposes an individual solution to a systemic problem, but raising the quality of teaching and learning in general, vocational and adult education.

The first task is to appreciate the implications of the complexities of teaching and learning in specific localities and only then to devise policies to respond to those implications. We need an approach that constructs policy, based on a deep understanding of the central significance of what happens in classrooms, e.g. by first assessing the needs of learners, tutors and institutions, the demands of practice, the conditions of local labour markets and how these (and many other) factors interact differently and dynamically in particular areas.

A high-profile example of centralised policy making in this sector is the focus on ‘good’ or ‘best’ practice, which has recently been intensified into a concentration on excellence; or as the White Paper on FE boasts: ‘we will eliminate failure’ (DfES, 2006, p. 56). This article critically examines these highly significant shifts in the rhetoric of policy, finds them wanting and suggests that we need to face up to the complexities involved in deciding what is ‘good practice’ and how it can be transmitted. Much research has been published on the difficulties of transfer, from the pioneering research of Edward Thorndike (1913) to the model of transfer as a learning process proposed by Michael Eraut, but there remains ‘profound ignorance of the nature and amount of the [new] learning involved’ in transferring knowledge from one setting to another (Eraut, 2004, p. 201).

What is at the heart of the sector?

Confusion reigns within official circles and even within the same policy text as to what constitutes the heart of post-16 learning. For instance, the White Paper on FE

confidently states on its first page that 'the needs and interests of learners and employers [are] at the heart of the system' (DfES, 2006, p. 1). Only five pages later, the needs and interests of learners have been forgotten and the Government shows its true colours by claiming, 'we will put the economic mission of the sector at the heart of its role' (p. 6). On page 41 of the same document 'qualification reform' has become 'the heart of our strategy', but five pages later comes another change of heart, so to speak: 'a continued drive for quality improvement is at the heart of this White Paper' (p. 46). *Either* the sector has one enormous, all-embracing heart and no head, *or* it has four separate hearts, *or* different civil servants draft different chapters within the same text without reference to each other, *or* the Government, desperate to transform the sector quickly, is uncertain which of its myriad proposals is the most important and hopes that some combination of measures will magically prove to be effective. Whatever the explanation, the result is sloppy thinking which sends out contradictory messages.

Our own view, formed from studying 24 learning sites (12 in the North-East and 12 in London) in FE colleges, Adult and Community Learning (ACL) centres and work-based learning (WBL) providers,⁵ is unequivocally that the relationship between tutor and student is, or should be, at the heart of the sector. The emphasis should be placed *neither on learning alone, nor on teaching by itself*, but on the interactive processes of teaching and learning, which should be viewed as the two inseparable sides of the same coin. When teacher and learner are engaged in some shared activity, 'the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a teacher—and upon the whole, the less consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better' (Dewey, 1961, p. 160). We particularly wish to oppose the modish celebration of students' learning, as if it could somehow be dissociated from the teaching of their tutors or the assessment of their work. If we are right, then the main policy questions become: what are the characteristics of effective teaching and learning relationships? What pedagogy (or pedagogies) is most suitable for the wide variety of subjects taught in vocational education? What educational, social and financial arrangements will best promote such relationships? And what institutional and political climates and strategies help or hinder such relationships? The role of this article, however, is to explore the Government's attempt to reform the sector by, in part, disseminating 'good', 'best' and now 'uniformly excellent' practice.

From 'good' to 'best' practice

Government policy in this sector operates like a ratchet screwdriver with no reverse movement allowed; only constant forward progression is acceptable, e.g. 'all provision must be consistently good and continuously improving' (DfEE, 1999, p. 43). In the rest of the world the learning curves of students acquiring a new skill, understanding or ability, as studied by psychologists, typically show: sudden bursts of improvement, an occasional plateau where nothing new is apparently being learned but consolidation may be taking place, and also dips in performance which

can be deep and prolonged, where learners appear to forget what they had previously provided evidence of acquiring. No such 'normal' deviance from a smooth upward curve is tolerated by politicians and policy makers, who insist on nothing less than continuous improvement by all providers and learners. The 'normal' patterns of learning are a serious obstacle to steady upward progression so they are ignored, if they were ever known, by those who demand that ever more 'stretching' targets are met.

In January 2003 the Standards Unit (SU) was established as part of *Success for All*, which sets out the Government's strategy to transform the sector in order to 'identify and disseminate good practice' (DfES, 2002, p. 12). Later in the same document, the job of the SU has become the identification of 'best practice' in the four areas of 'delivery' methods, assessment, content and teaching and training techniques (p. 31). The terms 'good' and 'best' practice are apparently interchangeable and unproblematical; they are also undefined, but somehow their meaning is considered to be widely understood and agreed. The difference between 'delivery methods' and 'teaching and training techniques' is also left unexplained. The SU was required to produce for each of these four areas 'the key deliverables' of: guidance to practitioners, an intensive face-to-face training programme, revised initial teacher training, an 'ongoing support programme' and teaching materials (p. 31). These materials are to be 'incorporated directly into lesson plans' (Association of Colleges, 2005, p. 8). Little is being left, it appears, to the skilled judgement of professionals.

A DfES research project into *Factors Influencing the Transfer of Good Practice* criticised governmental assumptions that 'good practice' can be so easily identified and transferred. It commented: 'The concept of a common decontextualised practice may be nothing more than a delusion' (Fielding *et al.*, 2004, p. 58). Two of the key findings of this study (e.g. that talk of transfer marginalises the importance of developing new ways of working which fit the different professional setting of the partner who has to learn the 'good' practice; and the need for extended periods of time for 'joint practice development') present considerable difficulties to the model of transfer chosen by the SU. By autumn 2005 the SU had produced Teaching and Learning Frameworks in eight curriculum areas from Construction to Health and Social Care. Each framework contains 'a teacher guidance book, a range of learner resources, teacher-training resources including training videos and DVDs (where appropriate) and guides and a CD-ROM, illustrating the approaches and containing support materials and session plans' (www.successforall.gov.uk [accessed 15 July 2005]).

The main criterion for success, as always with such curriculum materials, will be how extensive is the take-up among those practitioners who were not part of the trials and pilots. The SU's approach was to invite each post-16 learning organisation in England to nominate a 'subject learning coach' for each of the eight priority curriculum areas, with the intention of training 3000 of these coaches by March 2006. In what were rather insensitively called 'master classes', the 'best demonstrated practice' which had been observed in particular pilot sites was offered as a resource to practitioners in a wide variety of colleges or private training firms (see Cousin, 2004).

One difficulty for this approach is that it is of little help to practitioners to talk in generalities about 'good practice', as Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) reports tend to do. For example, in their report *Evaluating mathematics provision for 14–19 year olds*, the inspectors claim that the strongest and most inspirational teaching in numeracy programmes:

- Conveyed enthusiasm for mathematics
- Stemmed from robust subject knowledge
- Showed excellent classroom skills
- Embedded the work in compelling and relevant vocational contexts (2006, p. 11).

Good maths teachers and competent heads do not need visits to 26 schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges to reach such obvious conclusions. What practitioners want is, for example, help with teaching Business Finance as part of the Edexcel GNVQ (General National Vocational Qualification) course to Level 2 students, who range from able, female immigrants from Somalia with little English to indigenous working-class lads with a long history of failure in maintained schools. The general point is well summarised by Brown *et al.*: 'knowledge is situated, being in part a product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed and used' (1989, p. 32).

At the time of writing (in March, 2007) there was no evidence available from national evaluations of the self-styled 'Transformation Programme', as the sources cited by the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) (2006, p. 25)⁶ proved, on request, to be interim studies not deemed by the DfES to be sufficiently rigorous to be placed in the public domain.⁷ That leaves a study by Liz Browne which is descriptive rather than critical; nor is it strictly independent, as her data were collected by a consultancy firm 'acting on behalf of the Standards Unit' (2006, p. 276). Moreover, her response categories were restricted to 'Too soon to tell' and 'A little/some/significant impact' with no opportunity for the 17% of people who responded to record 'no impact' or even 'negative impact'.

The notion of spreading 'good' or 'best' practice is, however, fraught with further problems, which may help to explain why it happens so seldom. First, as David Hargreaves has pointed out:

The term itself is ambiguous and flabby. Often 'good practice' and 'best practice' are treated as synonyms, although clearly 'best practice' suggests a practice that has been compared with others and has proved itself better than other 'good' practices. (2004, p. 72)

'Best practice' also implies that there is only one approach which, if used, will solve any difficulties. The notion of a single, optimum solution to a wide range of complex problems has also been seen by some commentators as the beginning of the slide into authoritarianism (see Scott, 1998).

'Excellent' practice could be interpreted as a more liberal term than 'best' practice, since excellent practices could be flourishing in many colleges across the country, just as there are plenty of excellent football teams in the Premier League but only one 'best' team. But in the official texts 'excellent' is clearly meant to be an

improvement on 'best', so it carries from 'best' the implication that there is One True Model, which only needs to be discovered and disseminated for standards to rise.

Those who consider that judgement exaggerated may care to consider the suggestion in the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit document on reforming the public services that 'the best response may be for government to simply take a top down approach and to require the adoption of best practice' (PMSU, 2006, p. 58). The detailed example given is where 'the government has made a commitment to make synthetic phonics the prime method of teaching reading across the country' (p. 58). The research referred to by the PMSU is not, however, sufficiently robust to support such a universal change in practice.⁸

Second, 'good practice' is always contingent on the professional judgement of particular tutors working with particular groups of students with varying needs in particular settings and is rarely based on any research evidence. The critical questions remain: how do tutors form such judgements? What factors, values and local conditions do they consider? What counts as 'good' or 'best practice' varies from one learning site to another, and this is certainly the conclusion of the largest ever research project into FE. Their cultural approach helped them to see that 'the improvement of learning cultures always asks for contextualised judgement rather than for general recipes' (James & Biesta, 2007, p. 37). They argue that 'both 'improvement' and 'good practice' are terms that *imply* consensus or common-sense agreement, but which may *conceal* quite fundamental tensions' (original emphasis, p.144).

Third, if a practice is labelled 'good' or 'best', then it is incumbent on the labeller to specify explicitly the basis for that judgement; this is rarely, if ever, done and is not done by the SU.

So any claim that a particular method or resource is 'good' or 'best practice' needs to be met with the following questions: Who says so? On what evidence? Using what criteria? 'Best' for whom? Under what conditions? With what type of students? If what is officially promoted as 'best practice' turns out to be bad practice, will the learners be compensated?⁹ As Rice and Brooks argued, in relation to teaching dyslexic adults in the *Skills for Life (SfL)* initiative:

Even if the judgment [about 'best practice'] is backed by an appropriate theoretical background and teaching experience, it remains a judgment and one likely to be challenged by the next professional with similar background and experience. (2004, p. 86)

We need a much firmer basis for deciding what constitutes 'good practice'. After considering the views from practitioners we have interviewed, in the final section below we will try to provide it.

Views from practitioners

The tutors we interviewed in colleges, adult and community learning and work-based learning sites were almost unanimous in identifying the needs of learners as the most important influence on their practice. They explained 'good practice' in

relation to identifying and responding to the needs of the particular groups of learners we were studying, on Level 1 and Level 2 courses in colleges, or adult basic skills learners in the other sites. Many of those learners had been unsuccessful in their previous experience of education in school, and lacked confidence. A college tutor, talking about dealing with Level 1 nursery nurses, expressed succinctly a recurring theme in interviews with basic skills and subject tutors across all our sites:

We have got to get them to that point where they believe in themselves. (A1T1/2)

While few would have disagreed with that, the differences lay in the ways that they would help learners with widely differing needs get to that point: some focus on confidence building and showing learners that they are valued:

They need spoon-feeding until they get a bit of confidence up. (B2T1/3)

Others talked about team-building and encouraging mutual respect with a Level 1 group, in order to foster inclusion and stifle bullying; about breaking down assignments into very small sections, to give learners tasks they could succeed in; or about the provision of learning support in the classroom and learning mentors. One course leader described how Level 1 childcare learners who had achieved that qualification but were not well equipped to cope with Level 2 would be steered towards a progression route which suited them, in, perhaps Art or Small Animal Care. Each solution could be seen as 'good practice' in achieving the professional goal of enabling learners *in a specific context* to believe they could succeed. The need for self-belief was universal; the means of achieving it differed between sites, and even between learners in the same site.

Were staff looking for handbooks of 'good practice' to guide them? Staff in two of our colleges had been involved in the work of the Standards Unit, producing materials and appearing in videos, and others had looked at the materials and thought they would be a useful source of new ideas. Some of those who did use them did so selectively:

They have got a Health and Social Care pack and there are bits in there that I have used, on Health and Safety and a bit on Child Protection and there is a little bit in about professional development, but there is nothing for us [in Childcare]. But we have got quite a lot. I make a lot of my own resources ... I am quite imaginative with resources. (A2T1/4)

Another tutor had tried them, but used them selectively, having found they did not fit the needs of a particular group:

There are certain of the Standards Unit materials which I won't use. I think they are too—maybe set up for the 14–16 year-olds. There is a card game and I tried that on the apprentices, and for a few minutes they were interested, but they would rather see it on [the whiteboard]. (A2T1/4)

This tutor possessed two sets of Standards Unit materials, one of which was still wrapped in cellophane, and the other had been opened but nearly all the contents were still in their original wrappers. His manager was a fan of the materials, but admitted that there was a reluctance on the part of tutors to use other people's materials:

I think it's a natural reluctance that people always think that their material is better, but it's changing. What we say to people when we are doing best practice, we say: 'Here's ours. Have a look at it—do what you like with it.' (A2M1/2)

In District College, a Health and Social Care tutor reported that a Learning Coach had been trained and was providing training in incorporating games into teaching, which was seen as particularly valuable for tutors who had not been teaching for long. In Business Studies there, the manager thought the materials were being sampled, was not sure how widely they were being used, but believed that a 'joined-up' approach involving both the materials and input from learning coaches might

raise awareness and generate a bit of this innovation ... or you could adapt those materials to get across as a teacher what you want to deliver. (D2M2/5)

Another manager saw the potential for the Standards Unit materials to help both with teaching quality and financial constraints:

What the Standards Unit is doing is teaching us to deliver in a different way and using a variety of methods and actually showing that it doesn't have to be expensive. (D1M1/5)

While the Standards Unit materials were aimed at college staff, *SfL* teaching materials had been produced for basic skills tutors. In this context too, we found staff who, without being critical of the content of these materials, were very aware of the limitations of over-reliance on them by inexperienced tutors in some settings:

People are giving [learners] out the workbooks—so you're no longer getting the toys, the play games, the bits that we have lying around: all you're getting now is, for ease and for speed and for keeping up with where you are, all you're getting is, 'It tells you to look at workbook 2. Here is workbook 2. If you get stuck, just come and see me: I'll be in the corner.' (MT1/2)

The overall message is that 'good practice' materials may only lead to creative teaching if they are used imaginatively by a tutor who knows the needs of the particular group of learners and who has the experience and confidence to adapt them to that end.

If the 'secrets' of 'good practice' cannot be discovered by using pre-prepared materials, can they be distilled from the various elements which tutors identified, when asked what changes they were making to improve learning, and what they considered 'good practice' in their area? Regrettably, we think not. The list would be too long, and include individual traits, such as commitment, empathy with the learners, patience, skill in explaining expectations of learners and in providing challenging feedback, flexibility and willingness to work long hours on lesson preparation, assessment and administration; characteristics and cultures of course teams, such as sharing ideas and resources, ensuring a consistent approach in dealing with learners, planning together, sharing a professional background and knowing the needs of the employers in the sector learners are preparing to enter; and factors in management and organisational culture, such as ensuring that staffing levels are adequate, that the conditions for staff to remain lifelong learners exist, and that staff feel valued, stay motivated, and share the vision of the organisational leadership.

The list could be longer, but the problem is that we could never claim that the list was exhaustive, nor that it could do justice to even one of the 24 learning sites we visited, unless that context were discussed in exhaustive detail. It would also contain internal contradictions: for example, a very cohesive team of childcare tutors, all formerly nursery nurses, were justly proud of their closeness to employers and excellent knowledge of the sector their learners would work in; but to suggest that such conditions become an essential prerequisite for 'good practice' would be to devalue the efforts of tutors working with less collegial support, in less clearly defined vocational areas, such as Business Studies, but still providing excellent teaching and support, and working long hours at nights and weekends to ensure that their learners achieved.

At managerial level, the list would highlight differences between managers who valued stability, motivation and commitment in their teaching teams, others whose focus was mainly on responding to policy levers and driving up numbers for retention and achievement, and others still who wish to encourage innovation in teaching methods. One manager described 'good practice' in terms of compliance and keeping up with changes deriving from government policy, to maximise funding:

I suppose a year of consolidation would be nice, but it's not likely to happen. ... If we're told basically, 'This is what you do: this is what we suggest you do and your funding depends on it', then is that not what we do? (B2M3/5)

Another, intent on raising achievement through close monitoring and teaching focused primarily on students' assignments, declared candidly:

I don't care about the staff, to be honest. If they want to leave, I'll get more. (C2M1/2)

Unsurprisingly, that did prove necessary. Our point here is that meanings of 'good practice' are contested, both within and between levels of staffing in organisations, and, if we look across all 24 learning sites, these differences multiply. We are also mindful that our sample of sites is tiny in comparison with the 6 million learners in the learning and skills sector (LSS), and that we were originally directed towards that sample by college or LSC managers who identified them as examples of 'good' or interesting practice.

From 'best practice' to 'excellence'

In early 2006, the Government rationalised all the agencies involved in quality improvement and accountability; it established the Quality Improvement Agency (QIA) and a single inspectorate, the Adult Learning Inspectorate being amalgamated into Ofsted. These moves are part of the constantly changing architecture of organisations in the post-compulsory sector. The arrival of new bodies with new Chief Executives also allows Ministers not just to continue but to intensify policy: the number of priorities is increased, the criteria for the success of the new organisation become more numerous and explicit and, in the case of the QIA, 39 'key deliverables' for nine areas of work are listed on three pages (see Annex C, Grant Letter to QIA, Kelly, 2006). So, according to Andrew Thompson, the new Chief Executive of QIA, its job is to move the sector 'from a culture of improvement

via compliance to a culture of excellence' (Thompson, 2006). No mention is made of the fact that 'the culture of compliance' was and remains a rational response by providers to the plethora of policy initiatives from government.

The QIA has already spawned a set of new acronyms for it has produced a three-year Quality Improvement Strategy (QIS), engaged with a Quality Improvement National Advisory Group (QINAG) and worked with the LSC to establish Regional Quality Improvement Partnerships (RQIPs). The QIA will be closely controlled by the DfES, not only by the most detailed and challenging of remits, but by an annual review of progress and by 'Ministerial reviews ... held on a quarterly basis from July 2006 onwards' (Kelly, 2006, p. 4). In short, the QIA is a Non Departmental Public Body in name only, and it will be micro-managed by the DfES, which seems unable to wean itself from a culture of command and control, as recommended by the Foster Report (2005).

A central part of the QIA's remit is 'the drive for excellence' (QIA website, www.qia.org.uk [accessed 23 May 2006]). Some of its earliest tasks were to define excellence, articulate a vision of it, and 'assist the sector to build excellent organisations with the capacity for self-improvement' (QIA website, www.qia.org.uk [accessed 23 May 2006]). In March 2006, the DfES published the first ever White Paper on FE and emphasised the same broad themes. The sector is charged, for example, with 'ensuring that the quality of teaching and learning is uniformly excellent' (DfES, 2006, p. 18) and warned that the Government will take 'decisive action to eliminate failure' (p. 55). These phrases may well return to haunt the Department, which in a year or two will need a new form of exhortation, as it seeks 'deliberately and significantly [to raise] the bar of quality and performance' (p. 24). But how do you improve on 'uniform excellence'? Can the demand for ubiquitous perfection be far behind? Such unattainable objectives could only have been written by politicians and policy makers who are seriously remote from the realities of teaching Level 1 students in FE colleges, or adults with learning difficulties in ACL centres, or employees in WBL, who have never received an hour's training in over 20 years of work.

Another worrying feature of this intemperate rhetoric is its implicit model of learning and of learners. Nowhere in the official texts are the differences between 'good', 'best' or 'excellent' practice defined; so their meaning remains implicit, as if we all understood and agreed on what they mean. Similarly, the Government is silent about what it means by learning, but a close reading of the texts suggests that a narrowly conceived 'acquisition' model of learning is favoured where learning is thought of 'as gaining possession over some commodity' (Sfard, 1998, p. 6). For instance, the QIA has to provide 'appropriate packages of support to teachers and trainers' and 'ensure effective transfer within the provider network' (Kelly, 2006, pp. 3 and 8). The intensely complex processes of learning and transfer are thought of as a simple matter of delivering packets of 'good practice' to professionals, who apparently digest them without difficulty and then pass them on to colleagues who absorb them with similar ease. Those who have researched transfer explain why it happens so rarely:

What is transferred is not packages of knowledge and skills that remain intact; instead, the very process of such transfer involves active interpreting, modifying and reconstructing the skills and knowledge to be transferred. (Thomi-Gröhn, Engeström and Young, 2003, p. 4)

Michael Eraut conceptualises transfer in terms of no less than five interlocking stages which are briefly described here:

- Potentially relevant knowledge has to be recognised and extracted from the practice identified as 'good' or 'best'.
- The different social contexts of the 'old' and of the 'new' situation have to be understood, a process that often depends on informal social learning.
- The knowledge and skills relevant to the new situation have to be recognised.
- They have then to be transformed to fit the particular features of the new context.
- Finally, the relevant knowledge and skills have to be combined into an integrated, holistic performance that allows the professional to think, act and communicate effectively in the new, improved practice.

These are not simple processes which can be learned quickly, and they do not appear anywhere in official accounts of sharing best practice across the system. Is it any wonder that Eraut concluded by claiming 'that traditional thinking about transfer underestimates the learning involved by an order of magnitude' (2004, p. 220)?

It is time we took Bourdieu's advice about 'the restitution of the complexity of problems' (1998, p. 106), and restored to policy discussions and documents a recognition of the complexities involved in teaching, say, disaffected young people who have come to see themselves as unworthy human beings and as incompetent learners after 11 years of formal schooling.

This article will explore these complexities below; but first, new strategies have been published by government in 'the drive for excellence'.

The pursuit of excellence

In June 2006, the QIA issued for consultation the first draft of the QIS, called *Pursuing excellence: an outline improvement strategy for consultation*; and a month later, the LSC published a complementary document, entitled *Framework for excellence: a comprehensive performance assessment framework for the further education system*. In January 2007, the QIA produced the first ever National Improvement Strategy for further education (QIA, 2007). The dawn of the age of excellence has truly broken. The texts from the QIA are concerned with the quality of teaching and learning in classrooms and that from the LSC with the performance of institutions.

What, however, is the scale of the problem to which these two new strategies are the response? The White Paper on FE describes the extent of the problem:

2% of colleges are currently assessed by inspectors as inadequate, 20% of colleges have at least one curriculum area regarded as unsatisfactory, and 5% of leadership and

management in colleges is unsatisfactory. Inspection results for work-based learning ... indicated that 12% of providers were inadequate. (DfES, 2006, p. 15)

Moreover, the QIS indicates (2007, p. 6) that success rates have exceeded, by three percentage points and two years early, the target of 72% set by *Success for all* (DfES, 2002).

So this is not a sector in crisis and yet it is to be subjected to a new set of intensive performance indicators because of some, admittedly serious, problems at the margins. Government ministers and senior civil servants appear to have formed a deficit model of the whole sector and now propose to scrutinise all institutions and professionals within the LSS, by applying, as we shall see, a new panoply of regulatory measures. Pressure from the media, which will follow the publication of college league tables, and which has done such damage to primary and secondary schools via 'naming and shaming', will now be unleashed on the LSS, which seems incapable of learning from experience in other educational sectors.

The documents from the QIA and the LSC are clearly inspired by a genuine concern to improve the quality of learning and skills (the word 'education' is, however, systematically avoided) in the sector, but they both contain the same fundamental weaknesses as well as other specific faults.

First, both begin with brief political rationales for the new wave of reforms being introduced, rationales which are naïve, insulting and inaccurate. Naïve, because government ministers from both the main parties have for over a generation peddled the myth that improving the skills base will on its own create economic prosperity. Insulting, because the professionals and commentators working in the sector realise that other factors are equally, if not more, important such as investment in physical capital, in research and development and in innovation; moreover, employers need to improve the quality of jobs, goods and services via training, but they are left by government to train or, as happens so frequently in the UK, *not* to train their workers (Keep, 2007). Inaccurate, because the economic returns to investment in skills are declining, as more and more young people graduate and face competition from well-educated and professionally trained graduates from Eastern Europe and the Far East (Brown, 2006).

Second, the documents aim to transform the sector by providing 'excellence for all' and yet neither has an explicit model of change nor a theory of learning. To have no view of learning could be considered a serious deficit in a Learning and Skills Council, and similarly one would expect a Quality Improvement Agency to have a model of change.

Third, both strategies contain unrealistic expectations: 'All colleges and providers should be able to perform to excellent standards' (Rammell & Haysom, 2006, p. 2). Moreover, the QIS has as one of its objectives that success rates should 'become equally outstanding for learners from different backgrounds' (2007, p. 9). They list in great detail the desired benefits of their proposals, but neither contains an assessment of their perverse and unintended consequences. Unintended they certainly are, 'but unforeseeable they are not' (Arrowsmith, 2006). The LSC's *Framework for Excellence*, for instance, proposes seven new 'key performance

indicators', but each of these is divided into several constituent measures, making up a minimum of 27 new indicators in all (see Annex B, LSC, 2006, p. 16). And yet the LSC believes the new regulatory framework will require 'the minimum of additional work' (p. 11). It would be laughable, if it were not so serious.

There is also one serious anomaly in the new arrangements because the QIS will apply to school sixth forms, but the LSC's Framework will not; how, then, will the Government be able to make comparisons across post-16 learning if different sections are to be judged by different performance measures?

Let us now turn to each document in turn as each merits serious consideration. The draft QIS, for instance, was not so much a strategy as a series of lists, suggesting it had been written by a committee and numerous partners, without strong editorial control. So it consisted of 11 characteristics of excellence; five characteristics of successful colleges; four 'principles for enabling transformation' (p. 4) which don't amount to a model of change; three aims later broken down into 14 priorities and 33 action points; eight key partners and 12 others consulted; five functions of the QIA; at least 10 measures of performance; and 18 questions for respondents to answer. The final version of the QIS follows the same pattern but is somewhat more restrained, consisting as it does of: three aims, 11 objectives, 12 priorities, five principles, 23 new targets and indicators of success and 34 responses to the final report of the Leitch review of skills. It is clear from this list what will dominate official thinking in the coming years—the move to a demand-led system.

In similar vein, the DfES has produced a list of the qualities expected of teachers who are appointed to the 'Excellent Teacher Scheme'. The list runs to 87 characteristics, including the ability to 'show a consistent record of parental involvement and satisfaction' and to 'ensure successful learning by all pupils' (DfES, 2005a, p. 13). Such unrealistic standards amount to a counsel of perfection.

The draft QIS began by offering a definition of excellence: 'We believe that excellence means developing, maintaining and delivering to the highest standards of responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency' (2006, p. 9). There are two serious problems with this definition. First, *what* is to be developed, maintained and 'delivered' to the highest standards? Second, the three big criteria by which the success of the strategy is to be measured are responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency, but equity is not considered to be as important. So the FE sector would be judged a success by QIA if it could demonstrate that it was responsive, effective and efficient, even if it remained inequitable or were to become even more inequitable than it currently is. Certainly, the text went on to explain in more detail some of the main characteristics of its 'Pursuit of Excellence' and in seventh place it argued that 'equality of opportunity is actively promoted' (p. 10). That, however, seriously demotes equity which, ironically, is given unequal status to that of the three big criteria of responsiveness, effectiveness and efficiency. By page 19, the document was claiming that 'our notion of "excellence" fully incorporates equality and diversity', but no detail was given of what that might entail.

The draft QIS also helpfully included in Annex D a list of definitions of 'learners', 'national partners' and so on. As discussed above, however, it contained no

definition of learning or of ‘good’ or ‘best’ practice. Without such definitions, the sector is likely to flounder in a morass of unexamined and untestable empiricism. Interestingly, the final version of the QIS omits the definition of excellence, Annex D and any mention of equity.

The second text is the LSC’s *Framework for Excellence*, which is part of the Government’s aim to ‘develop an FE system that is responsive to the needs of our economy and our society’ (Rammell & Haysom, 2006, p. 2); but neither the Minister of State for Lifelong Learning, Further and Higher Education nor the Chief Executive of the LSC are prepared to concede that the needs of the economy and of society are frequently in conflict; when, for example, business and industry create greater inequalities and social exclusion.

The LSC also wastes no time in withdrawing its iron hand from its iron glove. Systems of performance management are to be ‘robust’ (Foreword); standards will be ‘demanding’ (p. 6); a new category of ‘underperforming’ will be introduced (p. 6); intervention may consist of ‘formal notice to improve or the removal of funding’ (p. 6) and the process of self-assessment is to be ‘rigorous and robust’ (p. 7). It is not clear who will decide whether the self-assessment by colleges and providers is sufficiently ‘rigorous and robust’—the colleges themselves, peers or perhaps Ofsted? What does this mean for self-regulation?

We have also been led to believe that the reshaped LSC wishes to establish new relationships with colleges and providers, based on trust, and yet the Framework for Excellence warns:

Chairs, Principals and Chief Executives will be expected to make a signed statement in annual reports to the effect that the performance ratings are an accurate reflection of the college’s or provider’s performance. (LSC, 2006, p. 11)

What happens if a principal refuses to sign? What if he or she considers that the statistics produced by the performance ratings seriously misjudge the qualitative work of his or her organisation? And what will such a requirement do for the relationships between the regulators and the regulated?

This Framework is a concerted attempt to pin down the providers. It is also overwritten in what looks like a desperate attempt to placate the politicians; for instance, it talks of ‘precise quantitative definitions’ (p. 3) for the key performance indicators and twice claims ‘the Framework deals with *absolute* standards rather than relative assessment’ (LSC, 2006, pp. 14 and 15, emphasis added). The idea that the work of a large city college, with 20,000 students and 2000 staff can be assessed under the seven headings of ‘delivery against plan’ (a euphemism for responsiveness to government), responsiveness to learners and to employers, quality of provision and of outcomes, and financial health against ‘*absolute* standards’ betrays a failure to understand assessment and its limitations. All assessment fundamentally is based on judgements, and claims by the LSC that it can allocate funds based on ‘absolute’ judgements are spurious. The LSC is trying to judge quality and levels of achievement, and is not measuring physical properties like size of head or length of hair.

The tyranny of momentum

How are we, however, to explain the frenetic activity of politicians and policy makers in this sector, as they constantly increase the pressure on practitioners to move from 'good' to 'best' practice and now on to 'excellence for all'? They are driven in part by the need for quick results before the next general election, in order to demonstrate that manifesto pledges have been kept. Peter Hyman, in his account of his time as chief speech-writer to the Prime Minister, shows the importance in modern politics of being in control of the media and of seizing the agenda: 'Momentum is essential or politicians are accused of drifting. This meant constantly coming out with initiatives, talking points, speeches, nuggets of policy' (2005, p. 384).

The culture of permanent restructuring, which particularly affects the LSS, also needs explaining. For Ewart Keep, state control of the English education and training system is akin to playing with the biggest train set in the world, where 'the cycle of intervention takes place to a pace and tempo dictated by the internal dynamics of the political process rather than the real needs of the education and training system and those who work within it' (2006, p. 55). It is difficult to resist the conclusion that such constant turbulence takes place in the LSS because the sector remains invisible to most politicians, academics and commentators, as, with very few exceptions, neither they nor their children have ever passed through it (see Coffield, 2007).

Politicians and policy makers no longer concern themselves solely with strategic issues such as funding, targets and performance indicators, but with professional topics such as how students should learn, how tutors should teach and what methods they should use. Behind these simple-sounding but treacherous questions, however, lies a far deeper question which the Nuffield Review of 14–19 Education and Training poses as follows: 'what counts as an educated 19 year old in this day and age?' (Nuffield, 2006, p. 1). It is an excellent question, but 19 year-olds and, for that matter adults of all ages, today need more than a good, general education; they also need vocational training and a job worthy of a human being.

From critique to construction

So far this article has probed and questioned the educational assumptions behind both existing policy and future proposals. It is time to consider whether anything positive and practical can be rescued from the inherently contestable notion of 'good practice'. What follows is highly dependent on the work of Robin Alexander (1997), who has neatly dissected the term 'good practice' in relation to primary education. We have converted his analysis into the language and concerns of post-compulsory education, added to and re-ordered some of his analysis, but the original conception remains his and we are trying to build on his pioneering work.

Alexander proposed that there are five main dimensions of 'good practice', which he listed as:

- *political*, e.g. what practices do the Standards Unit (or other powerful groups) suggest I use?;

- *evaluative*, e.g. what practices do I most value or which best fit with my values?;
- *empirical*, e.g. what practices has research shown to be most effective?;
- *pragmatic*, e.g. what practices work for me and which do not? and
- *conceptual*, e.g. how do I marry my answers to the questions above to the essential elements of practice? What conceptions do I have of good teaching and good learning? This examination of ‘good practice’ necessarily leads us to scrutinise what we mean by ‘practice’.

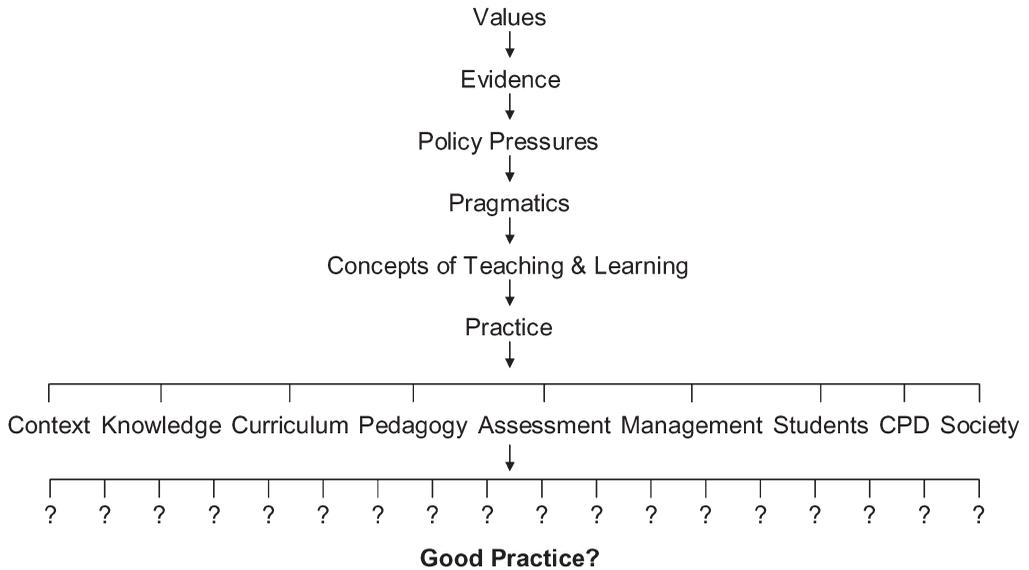
In post-16 learning there are at least nine elements of practice that need to be considered:

- The context, e.g. what localities do teachers and students come from and how should that impinge on my practice (see Jephcote *et al.*, 2006)?
- Knowledge, e.g. how is the ‘codified’ knowledge learned in college to be related to the ‘situated’ knowledge of the workplace (see Guile & Young, 2003)?
- Curriculum, e.g. what selection of knowledge should be presented to these students?
- Pedagogy, e.g. do my teaching methods dovetail with the subject I’m teaching?
- Assessment, e.g. what is the backwash effect of the assessment criteria on my teaching and students’ learning?
- Management, e.g. how do I plan, sequence and evaluate my practice? And what constraints have been imposed on my teaching by government policies as they have been translated into institutional practice by senior management?
- Students, e.g. what are their needs, capabilities and understandings?
- Professional training, e.g. what more do I need to know about teaching and learning?
- Society, e.g. what influence are local labour markets or particular employers having on my students, the college and its courses?

This is an illustration of what was meant earlier by restoring the complexity of the problems involved in deciding what constitutes ‘good practice’; moreover, all of the above topics need to be addressed simultaneously as well as separately.

We are now in a position to put these two frameworks (the five dimensions and the nine elements) together in an attempt to answer the question: what is ‘good practice’? Figure 1 sets out a typical intellectual journey which skilled and experienced practitioners are likely to follow in their own inimitable and probably implicit way. Most tutors are likely to agree that the five dimensions are not all equally important, and there is likely to be considerable debate about what order they should be placed in. Figure 1 presents one possible way of proceeding.

In this example, questions of value are addressed first, then research evidence is consulted, the advice of the Standards Unit is considered, practical considerations are weighed up, ideas about effective teaching and learning techniques are drawn into the planning and finally the nine elements of practice are reviewed. For example, what jobs are available for my students and what knowledge, understandings and skills do local employers currently require of new recruits? What



Based on R Alexander (1997)

Figure 1. What is good practice?

recent training can I draw on to help me construct my lesson plans? And what stages are my students at in their understanding of this part of the curriculum? When all these factors have been taken into consideration and a lesson plan drawn up, then some examples of 'good practice' *may be* the outcome in this classroom, with these students, studying this particular topic, with these methods, at this particular moment in time and in this locality. Alexander sums up well: 'good practice, created as it is in the unique setting of the classroom by the ideas and actions of teachers and pupils, can never be singular, fixed or absolute, a specification handed down or imposed from above' (1997, p. 287).

Typically, however, professionals do not decide what constitutes 'good practice' on their own. In the work of Etienne Wenger, for instance, practice is the source of coherence in a community, because through it members of a 'community of practice' are mutually engaged, they are involved in a joint enterprise and they develop a shared repertoire of routines, stories and concepts. 'Such communities', he argues, 'hold the key to real transformation—the kind that has real effects on people's lives', because of their 'engagement in action, interpersonal relations, shared knowledge, and negotiation of enterprises' (1998, p. 85).

Unfortunately these insights are not part (although they could become so) of the Government's implementation plan for 14–19 Education and Skills, which will 'require profound changes throughout the system' (DfES, 2005b, p. 7). The mechanisms for creating change throughout the nation's schools and colleges are the establishment in every area of a 14–19 partnership and a programme of learning

visits, ‘through which we will support people to examine and experience some of the most effective existing practice’ (DfES, 2005b, p. 8). There is no acknowledgement in any of these plans of the new learning that is required to convert the knowledge and practices of tutors in one setting into personal knowledge and skilled routines that could be used in a different school or college, as Michael Eraut has convincingly demonstrated.¹⁰

Finally, ‘good practice’ is not just a professional concern of individual tutors, ‘communities of practice’ or 14–19 partnerships: a vibrant democracy needs an open-ended approach to ‘good practice’, which remains within the control of reflective and learning professionals, which remains sensitive to constantly changing local contexts, and which provides the resources to deal appropriately with the complexities involved in its identification and dissemination. In sum, the political emphasis on momentum, increasing pressure for improved performance and innovation need to be matched by continuity for institutions, stability for students, professional autonomy and adequate funding.¹¹

Notes

1. The LSC was established in 2001 to bring together into a single learning and skills sector in England (excluding higher education) learning opportunities in further education, community and adult learning, and work-based learning for young people and adults.
2. The researchers wish to acknowledge the funding of this project by the Economic and Social Research Council—reference number RES-139-25-0105. Its full title is ‘The impact of policy on teaching, learning and inclusion in the new learning and skills sector’ and it ran from January 2004 to July 2007.
3. Sir Andrew Foster was invited to review the future role of further education colleges in England. Part of his remit was to consider ‘systems to disseminate best practice’ (2005, p. 109).
4. The White Paper on Further Education sets out the Government’s response to the numerous recommendations made by the Foster review.
5. For a fuller account of the research project and our methodology, see Edward and Coffield (2007).
6. The QIA was set up in 2006 to speed up the pace of improvement in the lifelong learning sector by focusing on continuous improvement and creating a quality improvement strategy (QIS).
7. And yet the QIS claims very specifically that ‘Evaluation of the national teaching and learning change programme found that success rates increased by 2.8% in the phase 1 pilots’ (QIA, 2006, p. 25).
8. A systematic review of the research literature on the use of phonics found that the Clackmannanshire research of Johnston and Watson (2004) contained two experiments, the first of which contained such design faults that it had to be excluded. The second experiment was included in the review which concluded that: ‘There is currently no strong random controlled trial evidence that any one form of systematic phonics is more effective than any other’ (Torgerson *et al.*, 2006, p. 49). A subsequent study by Johnston and Watson (2006), although it made substantial claims for synthetic phonics, had no control group, used different tests to measure progress, and outdated tests at that, such as the 1952 Schonell and Schonell.
9. This is not a hypothetical question. The DfES, for example, has for years promoted the use of learning style instruments which were neither valid nor reliable nor had beneficial impacts on practice (DfES, 2004).

10. The first official acknowledgement of the difficulties inherent in spreading 'good practice' is to be found in the final version of the QIS: 'sharing that practice is not easy, as it takes time, can be expensive and requires particular skills' (2007, p. 7). This is a welcome development.
11. We wish to thank our colleagues Ian Finlay, Maggie Gregson, Ken Spours and Richard Steer for useful comments on an earlier draft. We are also grateful to the two anonymous referees whose constructive criticisms helped to improve this article.

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