

EXCITEMENT AND EMPTINESS: HE IN FE AFTER FOSTER

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I will briefly summarize the purpose of higher education in further education colleges according to the 2005 Foster Report into Further Education. I will state that while the Foster report – and documents like it – provoke in me a sense of emptiness, there are nonetheless words in the report that as ‘HE in FE’ academics we should welcome. I take two of these words – vocational and skills – and consider their historical resonances. I argue that we can use these words to give a new sense of dignity and purpose – even excitement – to what we do.

In the second part of the paper, however, I return to the sense of emptiness that the market-oriented language of the report provokes in me. In trying to account for this sense I offer two opposed narratives about the purposes of higher education. The first narrative derives from the work of F R Leavis, the influential literary critic, and the second from the theologian Don Cupitt. I conclude by suggesting that whether we accept both narratives, or neither, we should listen to another that predates them, that of George Birkbeck, which is profoundly relevant to today’s market-driven higher education (and HE in FE) world.

Keywords

Vocational; skills

INTRODUCTION

What is higher education in further education for? If you read the 2005 Foster report, you won’t be in any doubt for very long. According to Foster¹ (who, although his main focus is FE, nonetheless has salient things to say about HE in FE) further education colleges contribute ‘more than a third of undergraduate entrants to higher education (indeed they are the main route for adults and for entrants from lower socio-economic groups)’ and ‘are absolutely essential to the Government’s drive on widening participation in higher education’. Why do we need to widen participation in higher education? For the same reason that we need, as Foster puts it, to ‘improve the ability output’ of secondary schools: we need to ‘upskill the current workforce’. The primary purpose of FE, and by implication HE in FE, is ‘building vocational skills’² for the economy and this purpose overrides even the other two – ‘promoting social inclusion and advancement and achieving academic progress’.³ This purpose, as Sir Andrew Pithily puts it, will give the sector ‘the basis of a renewed and powerful brand image’.⁴ So there you have it. Vocationally relevant, employable skill building. And if anyone thinks the Higher Education White Paper⁵ before Foster, or the Further Education White Paper⁶ after his report said anything significantly different, go back and have a look; a quote at random from the HE White Paper: ‘Further education colleges make an important contribution to meeting local and regional skills needs, including through the higher education they provide’⁷, and from the annex to the FE White Paper responding to Foster:

‘We propose a refocused primary mission for the sector on employability and economically valuable

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¹ *Realising the Potential: A review of the Future Role of Further Education Colleges* (2005) DfES

² *ibid.* p.19

³ *ibid.* p.22

⁴ *ibid.* p.22

⁵ *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) DfES

⁶ *Further Education: Raising Skills, Improving Changes* (2006) DfES

⁷ *The Future of Higher Education* (2003) DfES, p.62

*skills embedded through new funding and performance incentives. We will ensure that this skills focus is clear in individual providers' missions.*⁸

I want to pause here and ask a question. Why does this language seem so empty? Because I do not disagree with the importance of teaching skills, or of vocational education, and Foster rightly points to the honourable tradition, started by mechanics' institutes and technical schools, which further education colleges continue. And he is also surely right when he suggests that people's self-esteem can be improved by successfully learning new skills – that although the focus of a college's mission should be on skill-building, improved self-esteem in students will be a by product of that mission. So why, despite my agreement with Foster over these points, my sense of emptiness? Why is there something about the language of Foster and both the Higher Education and Further Education White Papers that makes me think that the world we inhabit has become grey, pointless, uniform and dull? Is their core message really a description, all the more powerful because it is implicit, of what it really means to live as a human being, now, in post-modern Britain, in the 21st century? This paper, therefore, will have two parts. In the first I will take two key words that the Foster report uses – and I could equally have taken the HE and FE White Papers – to describe the purposes of further education colleges and explore what these two words mean for us working in this field, particularly in HE in FE, concentrating on what we can construe as their positive, even exciting meanings. But in the second part I will attempt to focus on what I have described as the sense of emptiness that the language of the report provokes in me, and briefly recount two narratives that might account for that emptiness.

PART 1

If I had to summarize the purpose of FE colleges according to the report by Sir Andrew Foster⁹ in one sentence, the sentence would be this: the purpose of FE colleges is to teach their learners, including those studying on higher education programmes, vocational skills that will benefit the UK economy. I will take two words from that sentence – vocational and skills – and concentrate on their resonances and historical dimensions in order to argue that

although as academics in further education, we may feel after reading the report dispossessed of our academic backgrounds, we need not be threatened by this emphasis and can use it to our advantage.

I will start with 'vocational'. Vocational has an honourable etymology, derived from Latin, meaning a calling by God: and it is an historical error to assume that (a) 'vocational' education originated simply as a 19th century response to the needs of industrial employers, or (b) the word necessarily designates a divorce between theory and practice or knowledge and skills, and has always done so. Gordon Graham shows that the history of the ancient universities in England and Scotland is the history of their twofold aim – firstly that of 'practical training' and only secondly that of 'the pursuit of learning for its own sake'¹⁰. His quotation of the Papal Bull granted by Pope Alexander IV to King James IV of Scotland for the establishment of a university in Old Aberdeen highlights this: the Bull is a response to the claim made by James (or his adviser, Bishop Elphinstone) that in parts of Scotland 'men cannot be found not only only for the preaching of the Word of God to the people of those places, but even for the administering of the sacraments', because in that country there are 'some places ... in which dwell men who are rude, ignorant of letters and almost barbarous'¹¹. Graham's point is that vocational training was always part of a university's mission – and in further education we need not feel ashamed of that inheritance.

The subjects, of course, that were taught at the University of Aberdeen at the end of the 15th century bear little relation to those taught in the modern university and even less to those taught in the modern further education college. We do not offer – nor does our partner university – courses in canon law or theology, subjects for the training of the ancient professions. The Bournemouth and Poole College started its life giving vocational training in non-professional occupations: when the Bournemouth Municipal College opened on 29 May 1913 it offered courses of study in art, science, technology, commerce and domestic work, and developed part-time courses in subjects such as post office engineering and stone carving¹². But although this was and would still be regarded as a vocational curriculum, I want to reinforce my argument that the word 'vocational' need not and historically did not designate a distinction between

⁸ *Realising the Potential: A Review of the Future Role of Further Education Colleges: How DfES and LSC are addressing Sir Andrew Foster's recommendations*, No R1

⁹ *Realising the Potential: A Review of the Future Role of Further Education Colleges* (2005) DfES

¹⁰ Gordon Graham (2002) *Universities: The Recovery of an Idea*. Thorvorton: Imprint Academic, p.20

¹¹ *ibid.* p.20

¹² R S Hall (1997) *Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education: An Outline History*. Bournemouth: BPCFE, p.4

the words practice and theory, or skills and knowledge, whether the word is applied to the professional training offered by the ancient universities or the occupational training later offered by colleges such as Bournemouth and Poole.

My second word is 'skills'. One of the most moving documents in the early history of British adult vocational education – written in 1799 – challenges the distinction between knowledge and skills, and it is worth quoting in full as an example of how the two were envisaged as inextricably interlinked by one of the great pioneers of 19th century education for adults. Dr George Birkbeck describes how the idea occurred to him of offering classes to the workmen who built and assembled the machinery he needed in his post as Professor of Natural Philosophy – we would now say science – at Anderson's University, Glasgow:

'Whilst discharging the duties of Professor of Natural Philosophy and Chemistry in Anderson's Institution, at Glasgow, I had frequent opportunities of observing the intelligent curiosity of the 'unwashed artificers', to whose mechanical skill I was often obliged to have recourse; and on one occasion, in particular, my attention was arrested by the inquisitive countenances of a circle of operatives, who had crowded round a somewhat curious piece of mechanism, which had been constructed for me in their work-shop. I beheld, through every disadvantage of circumstances and appearance, such strong indications of the existence of the unquenchable spirit, and such emanations from 'the heaven-lighted lamp of man', that the question was forced upon me – why are these minds left without the means of obtaining that knowledge which they so ardently desire; and why are the avenues of science barred against them, because they are poor? It was impossible not to determine that the obstacle should be removed; and I therefore resolved to offer them a gratuitous course of Elementary Philosophical Lectures. When the plan was matured, it was mentioned to some of the wise in their generation. They treated it as the dream of youthful enthusiasm, and scarcely condescended to bestow upon it a sneer, for it appeared to them so thoroughly visionary and absurd. They predicted, that if invited the mechanics would not come; that if they did come they would not listen; and if they did listen they would not comprehend. The offer, however, was made; they came, they listened, and conquered; conquered that prejudice which would have consigned them to the dominion of interminable ignorance, and would have shut the gates of

*knowledge against a large and intelligent portion of mankind for ever.'*¹³

Birkbeck does not distinguish between 'knowledge' and 'mechanical skill': throughout this account he assumes implicitly that someone's possessing the second will inevitably lead to their wanting the first. And that assumption was borne out by his experience: one historian of adult education records that 'such was the zeal of the working men of Glasgow for knowledge, and such Birkbeck's skill as an expositor, that 75 mechanics attended on the opening night, and by the fourth Saturday evening the audience had risen to 500'¹⁴. Although the modern university or further education college is far removed in time from Birkbeck's passion for enlightenment and determination to open the gates of knowledge to those against whom they were closed, it's worth reflecting that a document like the QAA's foundation degree qualification benchmark is located in the honourable tradition started by Birkbeck and others like him. This describes in foundation degree students' education the place of 'knowledge and critical understanding of the well-established principles in their field of study and the way in which those principles have developed'¹⁵, thus giving the lie to those who think that the foundation degree – the apotheosis of vocational skills training at higher education level – is only about teaching people to fix things.

Like Birkbeck's mechanics, then, you may first assemble a machine and then want to know how it works. One can think of other examples where skills and knowledge develop interdependently: Freud, for example, started practising psychotherapy before developing the theory of psychoanalysis. Graham well describes the case of computer technology and service industry subjects where it is inconceivable that satisfactory results should be achieved through relatively unreflective techniques alone. And so it is that technological education has come more and more to involve its students in theoretical issues which prompt and encourage mental inquisitiveness and imagination. The very term 'technology' implies this, made up as it is of an amalgam of the Greek terms for both skill and explanation. Teachers of technology rightly deny that their task can be restricted to the instilling of mere techniques and accordingly any technology syllabus will have intellectual as well as technical components. This is true of electrical and mechanical engineering. It is even more so of

¹³ J W Hudson (1851) *The History of Adult Education*. London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans. Reprinted the Woburn Press: London, 1969, p.33

¹⁴ Thomas Kelly (1962) *A History of Adult Education in Great Britain*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 3rd edition 1992

¹⁵ Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) for Higher Education (2004) *Foundation Degree Qualification Benchmark* p.8

service industry subjects like transportation, management or media studies which, though practical, are not generally thought of as technological¹⁶.

But there is another reason why further education lecturers teaching at any level – HE level I or FE level 1 – also need not feel belittled by Foster's emphasis on skills, because rechristening certain kinds of knowledge or activity as 'skill' can be enlightening and liberating. My subject is social work, and when I started social work training I was infuriated that one of the key attributes of the effective social worker – empathy – was described as a skill. I didn't think it was knowledge either, it was an attribute: either you had it or you didn't. This quotation summarizes how I felt:

*'Hereford College of Technology advertises an '8 week evening course' in 'Basic Counselling Skills'. 'So what exactly will I learn?' asked one section. Answer: 'active listening, exploring thoughts and feelings, use of language, empathy and the use of questions.' Somebody might actually need help from someone certificated in this course. Those who think empathy is a skill are unlikely to be able to share anyone's feelings. There must be human damage as a result of these shams.'*¹⁷

I no longer agree with this position, believing now that empathy is indeed a skill that can be learned – with great difficulty and humility, it is true – but a skill nonetheless. To believe this is liberating because it is to believe that human beings can change, whereas to believe either that we are born empathetic, or good listeners or good linguists or good essay writers or good mechanics or whatever, or that we are not, is profoundly depressing. Good teachers can help learners to acquire skills.

PART 2

These two words, then – 'vocational' and 'skills' – are the key words I have taken from my summary of the purposes of HE in FE, according to Foster. I repeat that I do not find that these words belittle what we, as HE in FE academics, are trying to achieve. We should be excited by them, as inheritors of Birkbeck's noble mission to open the gates of knowledge to those against whom they are closed. But now I want to come to the second part of this paper – the part concerned with what at the beginning I described as my sense of emptiness on being exposed to Foster's language. In trying to account for that sense I will offer two brief

alternative narratives – and like the author of a post-modern novel (or is it pre-post-modern novel?) – ask you to choose between them.

The first, which I will call the *end of civilization* narrative, is derived from two sources – the work of F R Leavis, who died in 1978, and *The New Idea of a University*, the 2001 product of two of Leavis's disciples, Maskell and Robinson. This narrative suggests that by embracing the language of the market place (which is indeed the language of the Foster report), universities have lost whatever authority they once claimed, that

*'the genuine university subjects have collapsed, often into nonsense ... put together, the proliferation of useless non-subjects means that most of the academics at present employed in higher education, and the 'cohorts' of students they 'produce' are wasting their time. The dilution and/or nonsense in some institutions has got to the point of making genuine university work impossible to any minority still capable of pursuing it. The situation brings learning into contempt ...'*¹⁸

Maskell and Robinson's overall argument is this: only a few institutions deserve to be called universities, and only a few students, studying a restricted range of subjects, deserve to attend them. The (in their view very real) threat to civilization from education policies such as those of the Higher Education White Paper or the Foster report (their book was published before both, and they would regard the philosophy behind foundation degrees as the apotheosis of stupidity), results from the loss of educated judgement which it used to be the place of the university to develop: this alone can distinguish between thoughts worth thinking and those manifestly not. 'Educated judgement is necessary to the nation, absolutely; without it, the nation loses its mind.'¹⁹ In their view a department of theology with an annual intake of fourteen students is as valuable as a department of e-business with four hundred. In fact, infinitely more so, for e-business (to take a random example) is not a genuine university subject, whereas theology is. The value of a university discipline is not to be assessed by the number of students following it. Genuine university subjects, in genuine universities, encourage their students to *think*, to ask ultimate questions about the purpose of life. Questions like these:

'What shall I do? What can I do? What are the possibilities of life – for me, and more generally, in

¹⁶ Graham op.cit. p.41

¹⁷ Duke Maskell and Ian Robinson (2001) *The New Idea of a University*. London: Haven Books, p.78

¹⁸ Maskell and Robinson op.cit. p.186

¹⁹ *ibid.* p.185

*the very nature of life? What are the conditions of happiness? What is life for?*²⁰

It was these questions which, in one of his greatest essays, F R Leavis suggested that the hero of Charles Dickens' *Little Dorrit* was compelled to ask. And in another essay he suggested that it is precisely the function of the university to ask such questions:

*'The real university is a centre of consciousness and human responsibility for the civilized world; it is a creative centre of civilization – for the living heritage on which meaning and humane intelligence depend can't, in our time, be maintained without a concentrated activity somewhere.'*²¹

So here I find one answer to Foster and his vision of the ultimate product of education – Marketable Man. The university is the place where humane intelligence is maintained and the ultimate questions wrestled with. But I differ from Leavis and Robinson and Maskell because I don't care whether the places where such questions are asked are not universities in Leavis's, Robinson's or Maskell's sense of the word, and I don't see why anyone shouldn't ask them, and try to answer them for themselves at any time, anywhere. I don't see why anyone shouldn't try to be a centre of consciousness, and I certainly don't see why those of us working in further education colleges shouldn't try. But what I wonder about is why such a vision of the function of higher education, or any education, should have so completely vanished from the discourse of a man like Foster. Reading Leavis after reading Foster is a little like thinking that the grey planet you live on is the only one in the universe and then being transported to another, infinitely more beautiful one many light years away, or a bit like the difference between breathing and not breathing. It is not that Foster is, personally, wrong. It is that the discourse in which he operates proposes a model of men and women, a model of what it is to be human, from which what used to be called the soul has fled.

My second narrative, which I will call the *non-realist, empty radical humanist* narrative, is very different from Leavis, Maskell and Robinson. Empty radical humanism and non-realism are key phrases in the thought of the theologian Don Cupitt, author of *The Sea of Faith* and many other books whose own discourse challenges those who think there can be, any more, an institution such as a university where only certain prescribed subjects are taught and, by

implication, only certain thoughts thought. To my contention that Foster's prose makes me feel empty, I can imagine Cupitt replying that to be alive now *is* to feel empty: there is no longer any absolute truth, any absolute wisdom, any absolute value:

*'In effect, every single subject studied in the modern polyversity is a field of discourse on which conflicting interpretations jostle against each other, and 'truth' can never be more than today's state of play ... Thus as we explore its implications non-realism unpicks the world, leaving us with no absolute Origin, no last End and no objective reality, or value, or truth. It leaves us with only a beginningless, endless and outsideless flux of conflicting interpretations; and since the whole analysis applies to us too, we ourselves are also melted down into the general flux. Hence my recent phrase: 'Empty radical humanism'. There is nothing but our language, our world, and the meanings and truths and interpretations that we have generated. The world fully becomes the world, bright and conscious of itself, only in us and as our world. We are the only worldbuilders; but we are as empty as our world. In the end, there is only emptiness and brightness, as in a late-Monet painting of vegetation and water. Beautiful, but – I must admit – ultralight.'*²²

CONCLUSION

I said that I'd ask you to choose between either narrative (of course, you may not want to choose either). For myself, though Leavis's vision of the function of the university remains compelling, I can no longer follow it because it simply excludes too many people, and I no longer believe with Maskell and Robinson that only certain subjects deserve to be studied in universities. Their image of the university is too close to a museum. I think instead that we should celebrate the opportunities that working in the modern 'polyversity' in Cupitt's phrase – and this includes HE in FE – gives us. We must develop our students' knowledge and skills and prepare them for employment – *of course*. But education, and especially university level education, is also the place where students should have the freedom to think, ask difficult questions, explore what it is to be human, build their worlds; and to say that students on HE in FE courses such as foundation degrees should not waste their time on such activities because of the demands of

²⁰ F R Leavis and Q D Leavis (1970) *Dickens the Novelist*. London: Chatto and Windus, p.216

²¹ F R Leavis (1969) *English Literature in our Time and the University*. London: Chatto and Windus, p.2

²² *An apologia for My Thinking* (2002. www.sofn.org.uk. Accessed 3 January 2006

employers or the vocational nature of their subject, or the skill needs of the UK economy, or whatever, is to be as guilty as those who sneered at Birkbeck's dream of opening the gates of the academy to those against whom they were shut.