

We need to talk about pedagogy

RATHER THAN FRETTING ABOUT PARITY OF ESTEEM, VOCATIONAL EDUCATION SHOULD FOCUS ON HOW BEST TO DELIVER OUTSTANDING TEACHING AND LEARNING, SAYS BILL LUCAS

WORDS PAUL STANISTREET

In January, Sir Michael Wilshaw, chief inspector of Ofsted, raised concerns about the quality of vocational education and the “one size fits all” model of education in England. Education “for children who do not succeed at 16 or would prefer an alternative to higher education”, he said, is “inadequate at best and non-existent at worse”. It’s a familiar point, says Bill Lucas, director of the Centre for Real-World Learning at the University of Winchester, but it’s also a highly simplistic one that ignores the crucial role of other system drivers. While Lucas agrees that grading young people at 16 has produced a system “with one pathway called general education and one called ‘other’”, and that the ‘other’ pathway is viewed as “somehow narrower or less good”, he rejects the suggestion that this is the fault of FE. There is, he says, lots of “great vocational learning and teaching”, a point borne out in Ofsted’s own annual report, which found only three per cent of

FE colleges were inadequate and 77% good or outstanding. To understand the bias in the system, we must recognise the “peculiarly toxic stranglehold on options at 16”, reflected in the EBacc school performance measure, which identifies five ‘core academic subjects’. “I don’t know why music and art, for example, are not deemed core academic subjects, but I know this is perpetuating a language of academic as opposed to something else,” Lucas says. “We shouldn’t be surprised if the effect of this is a two-tier system.”

Lucas, who last year co-authored *Remaking Apprenticeships* – a report commissioned by City & Guilds, which argued for learning to be put back at the heart of apprenticeships – is passionate about vocational and FE and its potential to offer “an ambitious, expansive and powerful alternative to academic routes”. Yet, he says, “those of us who beat the drum for FE have been too slow in being more aspirational”. Too often, the sector presents itself as being about narrowly

occupational skills, rather than a rich diet of outcomes to compare with the opportunities offered by general education. Lucas’ work on vocational pedagogy, by contrast, argues that “in addition to routine expertise or skill, you also need to have a system that actively creates what we call ‘resourcefulness’”. Resourcefulness, he explains, “is the capacity to think for yourself, to deal with the unexpected. It is what business wants, and it’s what we need our citizens to be able to do. We have to have people, not just for the workplace, but in their own lives, who, as Jean Piaget put it, ‘know what to do when they don’t know what to do’. That is a really powerful contribution of FE and one that is much underrated.”

Lucas and his colleagues have consistently argued for vocational teaching and learning to be about more than “routine expertise”, important though that is. As well as promoting resourcefulness, Lucas believes great vocational education





Bill Lucas, director of the Centre for Real-World Learning, University of Winchester

should also develop four key factors: functional skills – verbal, written, numerical, graphical and digital; craftsmanship – an aspiration for excellence and a pride in a job well done; a businesslike attitude in dealing with clients, suppliers and customers; and wider skills, including developing the dispositions of an effective lifelong learner. “The really important element of this more ambitious set of outcomes is craftsmanship,” Lucas says. “I know we haven’t got the word right, and I appreciate it’s gendered, but if you look at the systems that the world holds up, for example, in Switzerland and Germany, there is an utter determination to deliver excellence. It’s an ethic of excellence.”

The Centre for Real-World Learning has been examining some of the ways in which this ethic can be fostered, looking at the work of Holts Academy and Trafford College. “It’s clear that there are cultural and pedagogic ways in which this hunger, to be great, can be cultivated,” Lucas says.

However, vocational education must also be “real”, which means developing businesslike attitudes to issues such as time, money and customers, and supporting the development of dispositions relevant to the student’s future work and quality of life – what is sometimes termed ‘character education’. “Character includes perseverance, growth mindset, ability to collaborate, reflectiveness, grit, all that family of capabilities,” Lucas says. “These are things I think ought to be foregrounded in FE and in general education – there’s a lack in both.” He cites the example of Australia, which has a “capability-driven” curriculum, which starts from “the premise that you want kids to have, for example, high levels of creativity and critical thinking,” and plans teaching and learning content from there. He would like to see FE here similarly “on the front foot” about pedagogy and capabilities. “That’s what business wants, too. As John Cridland at the Confederation of British Industry argued, schools and colleges need a wider set of outcomes to be judged

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by. We need to expand our horizons as to what the point of FE is.”

Pedagogical leadership

School and college leaders have a critical role in creating a climate conducive to outstanding vocational teaching and learning, Lucas believes. “Leaders have had to learn a whole other set of skills to do with managing money. I think in many cases the managerial route has taken senior leadership away from the workshop and the classroom, from pedagogy, into accounting and performance management and all those other things. You need both. You need, within a senior leadership team, leaders who are passionate and well informed about best thinking and best practice in teaching and learning, and you need the whole team to model their absolute belief in the value of creating a climate in which learning can really flourish. Great pedagogic leaders model their interest in learning, they talk passionately about learning, they ask

questions about learning and show that they value the answers to those questions, and they ensure that everything in the college speaks of a world in which getting better at doing something is what the college is about. It’s about creating a culture in which this can thrive.”

Lucas welcomes the Government’s drive to create three million new apprenticeships, but has concerns about quality. “If this is not going to be another ‘false dawn’ we need to set our aspirations high. We need to stop and think about the best blend of teaching and learning methods, and we need to attend to the quality of our teachers, both by skilling up those already in the sector and making FE a really attractive place to work.” That, Lucas says, means not just restating the importance of vocational education, but going the “hard route” of “getting into the engine room and understanding how best we can make fantastic teaching and learning. We may not be comfortable with ‘pedagogy’, but it seems to me a no-brainer that helping teachers take the best teaching and learning decisions they possibly can in the interests of their learners, is where our effort needs to go.”

Lucas is optimistic about the future of vocational education. “I am excited about what the best schools and the best colleges do on a daily basis. There are some brilliant leaders and some stunning examples of outstanding practice, sometimes despite the system rather than because of it. We are now in a position to say with confidence that we know the teaching and learning methods that are most likely to deliver really engaging learning experiences. The job becomes an operational one: how can we ensure that all teachers acquire that, not through gap analysis and shaming, but long-term professional learning and appreciative inquiry, and shining a light where people are doing great work.” Leaders, for their part, must exhibit “courage, an unambiguous set of moral values, enormous cunning – because you never know when the system is going to change next – passion about learning, deep understanding of pedagogy, and an entrepreneurial spirit. I think that the capabilities that would describe a really powerful real-world learner would probably also describe a really great leader of an FE college.”

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Bill Lucas and Guy Claxton’s recent book, *Educating Ruby: what our children really need to learn*, makes the case for a wider capabilities approach to education.