*“Jumping from boulder to boulder and never falling, with a heavy pack, is easier than it sounds; you just can't fall when you get into the rhythm of the dance.”*

*(Jack Kerouac)*

**Chapter 11**

# Dancing in plain sight

**Doug Rouxel**

**Introduction**

This chapter examines a number of recent disputes in the FE sector around the professional position of teachers, in particular the dispute over the compulsory payment of fees to the Institute for Learning (IfL). This represents a particularly good example of how the sector responded – like the princesses in the dance – by taking a stand that was not only about resistance but also about taking positive action. What was fascinating about the IfL dispute was not that people hated the fees (which they did), it was the related discussion about what it meant to be a teacher in FE. At its root this was a discussion about what FE is for. I argue that real change to FE must evolve from this kind of dialogue – not one about funding methodologies, the right key performance indicators, or what success rates are ideal in your subject area. They are not even about which teaching approaches will ensure time to fulfill administrative duties alongside teaching. More important than these is taking any opportunity to change the sector for the better by rescuing the classroom from the statisticians and bean counters. Teachers need to reclaim the classroom and the whole sector not for the fulfilment of statistical goals, but for the sake of meaningful education.

Dancing in plain sight involves taking opportunities like those offered by the online forums that cropped up around the IfL site at the time of the fees dispute. There, discussion went significantly beyond the details of the dispute and into the much more fundamental areas of teaching and learning.

**Measuring education**

Metrics and performance indicators have come to define the professional worth of teachers both inside and outside the FE sector, which contributes to an active erosion of teachers’ professional identity. As abstract data becomes the principal lens through which their work is seen, so teachers are forced to focus less on education, and more on providing ‘correct’ data (Ball, 2003). This reliance on the measureable has manifested itself in a general top down and technocratic approach to education from college managers, sector bodies and the government. It has led to a crisis of professional identity among teachers in the sector as notions of added value, efficiency and outputs have replaced the ethics, values and trust on which the shared identity of teachers was previously built. Resistance to diminished conceptions of the professional role of teachers in FE was a feature of the dispute over membership of the IfL.

The FE sector has seen several disputes that have arisen not from the traditional concerns of pay or terms and conditions, but from a threat to the professional position of teachers. One such dispute was at Westminster Kingsway College in London where the local union branch operated a two-year boycott of teaching observations, opposing in particular the use of unannounced observations. These were perceived as a disciplinary tool rather than a means to address professional educational concerns. Elsewhere, one of the most significant local disputes in recent times where professionalism and performance indicators have been central was the so-called Halesowen 4 dispute in early 2013 at Halesowen College in the West Midlands. This dispute was sparked by the dismissal of four teachers in the college’s mathematics department. The college’s position was that these teachers were dismissed for failing to ensure that students fulfilled their potential and achieve their expected levels of attainment. The evidence which the college used to support this judgement was almost exclusively built on comparing their students’ A level examination results to college and national benchmarks. The regional union official accused the college of making selective use of the data in justifying their position, and argued that: ‘There is now a question over whether teachers in FE colleges can be dismissed purely on students’ attainment, making it a national issue’ (quoted in Radford, 2013). The Halesowen 4 dispute arose directly from performance indicators representing the outcomes of an educational institution, department or individual teacher. It exposed the assumption that the education is in some way quantifiable, that teacher performance can thus be measured as providing either enough or insufficient learning. The notion of a surplus in this situation is never addressed.

A system where success is based on comparing course data to those of the average of a wider set, in which the original course is included, will consistently mean that by this measure many courses are unsuccessful. There is, moreover, a tension between the complexity of the system by which FE teachers, departments and institutions are judged on the one hand and on the other the simple case that the outcomes on which performance indicators are based are very often beyond the control of teachers, managers and even college principals. The expected standard is inconsistent and one that it is impossible for everyone to meet. This system ensures that a large number of courses will be seen as failing, which can have a profound impact at the institutional level in terms of funding, and at an individual level, as in Halesowen, where teachers might lose their jobs. The logic behind the way these comparative data are used is that the relationship with the teacher is the sole determinant in the student’s achievement. This is not, however, the case. For example, students leave courses for a multitude of reasons (Yorke, 1999) that do not necessarily imply that the course, the college or the teaching is of poor quality. Yet, this poor quality is the implicit assumption of the system. Intrinsic to this system are financial imperatives that are compelling and crucial to any explanation of the erosion of teachers’ professionalism in FE. If the use of metrics leads to behaviour that is against the pedagogic interests of the community in which a college serves, ‘the money helps to persuade you that it’s a good idea’, as an FE college manager (quoted in Smith, 2007: 59) said, adding that ‘colleges saw the bottom line of their accounts and put that in front of the education of students’. This kind of unethical behaviour that derives from the culture of audit within the FE sector is a demonstration of how certain performance indicators may impact on the professionalism of FE teachers. What Ball (2003) has termed the ‘reprofessionalization’ of teachers is marked by the co-option of the professional identity of FE teachers into the marketization agenda. This places competition and the possibility of performing better than your peers at the centre of the professional identity. As the disputes at Halesowen and Kingsway colleges demonstrate, however, there has been resistance to some of these moves and the professional role of FE teachers has been a distinct area of contention in the conflict between pedagogical and other imperatives.

The most prominent dispute involving the professional standing of FE teachers centred on charging fees directly to all members of the IfL. Formed in 2002, the IfL initially started as a voluntary membership-led body to represent the professional interests of FE teachers. This position altered significantly with the implementation of The Further Education Teachers’ Continuing Professional Development and Registration (England) Regulations in 2007, which introduced the statutory requirement to belong to the IfL in order to gain and maintain a licence to practise as a teacher in the sector. These regulations also included the requirement to undertake at least 30 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) per year, which also was to be monitored and enforced by the IfL.

At first when membership of the IfL had become a statutory requirement the government had paid the membership fees. In the period following the implementation of the new regulations few FE teachers were openly hostile to the IfL, even if support for the organisation was lukewarm. Then at the FE sector conferences of the main FE teachers’ union, the UCU, in 2009 and 2010 motions were passed which noted concern about the IfL, and which instructed the Further Education Committee of the union to review the operations of the IfL and report back to the conference. A mood of engagement with the IfL was, nonetheless, prevalent in these debates. Until this point, many teachers’ only contact with the IfL had been when they were expected to report the CPD that they had undertaken to the IfL as the responsible body, generally in a crude form of the number of hours. Though this is a rather reductive measure of professionalism, the IfL was involved with other activities and almost certainly had some positive influences on the sector. These were not, however, always apparent to teachers whose relationship with the IfL was mediated principally through the mechanistic reporting of CPD hours.

The period of mild indifference towards the IfL came to an abrupt end immediately the funding of membership fees from central government ceased. At that point all FE teachers were expected to directly pay the organisation to maintain their membership and so their licence to practise. The announcement of this proposal was met with widespread opposition and the beginning of a serious backlash against the IfL. It led to arguably the most widely supported industrial action seen in the FE sector since the incorporation of colleges in 1993. This backlash against the IfL can be tracked across the UCU’s FE sector conference in 2011, which passed motions instructing the union to lead a collective boycott of the IfL, and in 2012 where a motion was passed condemning the IfL for its failures, and congratulating members for taking part in the collective boycott of payment of the IfL’s membership fees.

The exact numbers involved in the boycott are difficult to ascertain because figures for non-renewal of membership were not published at the time. Based on the number of teachers in the broader lifelong sector who were potential members and the number that had actually renewed their membership by July 2011 as outlined by the IfL to the *Times Educational Supplement* it would, however, be reasonable to estimate that more than 130,000 teachers refused to pay. This is well in excess of the 34,505 FE members of UCU at the time of the formal industrial action ballot over the fees boycott.

On first glance this dispute might be interpreted as simply being about opposition to a charge of £68 per year (later reduced to £38 in response to sectoral opposition to the fee) to, in effect, carry on working. Through the course of the campaign, however, it became apparent that there was more to the dispute than that. The IfL dispute encapsulated concerns not just about payment to receive a service which many FE teachers did not perceive let alone value, but other concerns about the expectations of them as professionals. The anti-fees campaign became a lightning rod for more fundamental opposition to the direction FE had been taken by the government. The campaign against fees also involved opposition to the government’s target-led approach both to the funding methodology and to the assessment of the quality of education provision. Though well beyond the direct responsibility of the organisation, the IfL found itself at the brunt of a general dissatisfaction with the priorities and management of FE.

In addition to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, the IfL’s leadership tended towards a contradictory approach to dealing with members. On the one hand, it consistently described itself as member-led, yet throughout the fees dispute its official response was dismissive of legitimate concerns raised by members. In an interview in 2011in *FE Week* the IfL’s Chief Executive indicated suggested that some of the backlash against the IfL was offensive and hurtful, but the organisation was at the same time unresponsive to constructive criticism. Similarly when asked by *The Guardian* newspaper about a petition against the fees, the IfL’s leadership’s response was to question the legitimacy of the petition rather than engage with the concerns it raised. This dismissive approach led to even more animosity between the IfL’s members and the organisation.

The dispute was driven not from the top of the trade union but from below, from union members and non-members alike who were absolutely committed to opposing payment of the IfL’s fees. These were the people who took to social media to discuss their reasons for condemning the IfL and to complain about the de-professionalisation of their roles, redundancies in FE colleges and reductive performance indicators that dominated management practice in the sector. The IfL had always had a significant social media presence; its Deputy Chief Executive was particularly active on twitter and he often engaged in discussions on Facebook and Linked-in. As the boycott gained support and members or would-be members asked more questions of the IfL, the organisation’s formal presence on social media shrank and it started to block out opposition voices. It restricted posting on once open Facebook groups and it limited membership of its Linked-in community, so that far from being led by its membership, the IfL was increasingly restricting and policing what the membership wished to express online. Whilst the dispute was at points acrimonious, the online spaces that opened up for discussion about the nature of FE were both interesting and inspiring for those involved. There were discussions about what FE was for as well as the nature of teachers’ professional identity. These took place in staff rooms and corridors, but also online through social media. Social media groups where the most energetic campaigners discussed these issues helped spread support for the vote to boycott fees in the formal union ballot for industrial action, which came well after many people had started withholding the fees themselves. These online groups ensured that individuals isolated in their institution could also get involved in the wider discussions that arose from the dispute. In other words, the dispute opened up a space in which to examine what professionalism meant.

As described here, there has been resistance to a pervasive culture within FE that is seen to be undermining the autonomy and professionalism of FE teachers; the disputes outlined here are only the most high profile examples. The use of industrial action in its widest sense can be effective in this resistance, with the IfL dispute in particular precipitating a significant amount of discussion, review and, finally, change in government policy. As Robson (1998) has highlighted and as the anti-fees campaign argued much change in FE is instigated from outside colleges, and especially by central government. This means that whilst resistance to the de-professionalisation of teachers must come from within the sector, fundamental change is unlikely to be achieved solely from within the sector. Using the metaphor of the princesses, it was the soldier – the outsider – who acted as a catalyst to move the story along. Other dangers exist. If we fail to resist the pressures of funding on the basis of performance indicators, and we see pay becoming related to the same performance indicators, then it seems highly likely that prospects for continuing employment will sooner or later be linked directly to them as well.

Those who wish to see real progress in FE and the capacity of teachers to meet the needs of diverse students have to put pressure on government to reverse policies that have led to the reduction of the educational process to a set of crude numerical values. There is a need for a more widespread resistance against the audit culture found in the sector because it has permeated the everyday lives of teachers and has had a profound impact on what it means to be a professional in FE. Plowright and Barr (2012) outline a vision of FE teacher professionalism that has ethical behaviour as a pillar and where values are intrinsic to both personal and corporate behaviours. This inspiring vision recognises above all that the judgments made in order to manage student teacher relationships in a supportive and sensitive way are the expression of true FE professionalism.

**Post Script**

As the final draft of this was being written, the Non-Executive Board of the IfL recommended to its Advisory Council that the IfL should close and the legacy assets be passed to the newly-founded Education and Training Foundation (ETF) through a deed of gift. This would entail the end of the IfL, and potentially the opening of a new chapter in the battle for the professional identity of FE teachers. The closure of IfL could lead towards a more progressive and cohesive discussion about the professional identity of FE teacher. We will have to wait and see if this changes the context of the dance.

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