

The Socially Critical Teacher: perceptions and misperceptions of postgraduate professional learning

Different modes of masters degrees

Some people in government have in mind only two models of masters degree for teachers. From their own out-of-date perceptions of university life they have constructed a picture that I call the ***Obscure Academic*** masters degree, one believed to: disregard the professionalism of teachers; lecture at them; make theory inaccessible; and lock teachers in a library until they come out with lots and lots of essays and a dissertation that no-one wants to read. It is a caricature that distorts the long-established reality of masters level work for teachers.

Their second model I call the ***Instrumental Official*** masters degree. It captures professionals and makes them instruments of policy. Look at what government has done to initial teacher education. Universities, with schools as their partners, must comply or die with this model. The emphasis here is upon standards, targets, value for money, competition, inspection, avoidance of failure and implementing official models of teaching, learning and assessment. If we are not careful we could end up with a very narrow notion of performance review tied to a compulsory masters degree which concentrates upon measuring what teachers are told or persuaded to measure.

My preferred model I call the ***Socially Critical*** masters. This liberates the professional; acknowledges the experience, expertise, values, interests and concerns of teachers; engages with and constructs theory; and engages with and constructs policy. The agenda for Every Child Matters fits here. In order to demonstrate the achievement of the intended outcomes of ECM both schools and teachers must be critical partners in society; not processors of children who signal success by the grade of quality they stamp on the product.

Should governments be frightened of teachers asking questions? Is theory really so scary? This is education that we are talking about: not the simplistic inculcation of orthodoxy. Anyone who believes in democracy should welcome a socially critical teaching profession: one that that can challenge and be challenged by theory; that examines its own practice from different perspectives; that engages with and helps to construct public policy rather than simply implementing it; that takes some risks; and that learns from mistakes.

Mode One: Traditional Academic

Disregarding the professional

What does it look like?

The ***Traditional Academic*** mode of masters is perceived by many people and groups to be widespread and dominant. It is what they think of whenever the word 'masters' is introduced to the conversation. In June 2004 the Universities Council for the Education of Teachers (UCET) found it necessary to confront the then Secretary of State for the DfES (Charles Clarke) on this issue in order to counter what it believed to be his dangerously out-of-date notion of what happens in masters programmes in education. It was a dangerous misperception because policy was being formed by people with this view and the thinking of UCET at the time was that unless it challenged this outmoded picture of what universities did when they joined with teachers to engage in professional learning in education it and its members would be excluded from playing a key role in educational sense-making.

Incidentally, the meeting with Charles Clarke was very successful. He accepted all the points made by UCET and asked for lots more meetings. Ruth Kelly, his successor, cancelled them all. Her agenda had been set by No.10. Unlike her predecessor she was not willing to subject herself to challenges that she might lose.

Essentially, this kind of masters degree (and doctorate) is perceived by policy-makers to be professionally irrelevant and to prevent participants introducing and deploying their personal professional experience, expertise, values and concerns in order to engage with and construct theory just to please academics.

Government, however, has a tendency to regard as relevant to the professional lives of teachers only that which supports the implementation of policy. So, if you hear talk of the experience, expertise, values and concerns of teachers in this context it is likely to be a captive version based upon the assumption that teachers should work to the targets and policies presented to them.

Rather than being a professional sense-making process, or even a process of delivering an official orthodoxy, the perceived emphasis of the 'Traditional Academic' kind of professional learning is upon acquisition of and respect for the knowledge of academics (also known disparagingly as 'theorists'). It is seen to be work-heavy, disconnected from reality, campus and library bound and out of date.

Having done lots of external examining, designed and validated PPD programmes, reviewed education departments, read lots of PPD applications and impact evaluation reports, undergone inspection, talked to numerous colleagues (most of whom have also been school or college teachers) and lost count of how many school teachers I have taught I can say that I encounter very little evidence that this mode of masters is anything like dominant within educational

departments in HE, though it remains as a kind of ghost of masters past and thrives in other university departments. It is, furthermore, almost thirty years since I did my own masters in education which I found to be very relevant and useful in my professional life so I guess that the perception has been wrong-headed for quite some time.

It remains, however, highly significant as the chief perception of policy makers and sometimes of fellow education professionals.

Typical Mode(s) of Delivery

Teaching methods and delivery are perceived to be limited to the lecture (possibly also the seminar) and to suit the interests of the tutor. They are also perceived to be exclusively campus bound.

Typical Modes(s) of Assessment

Modes of assessment are thought to be one-dimensional: essays and dissertations. It may take a while for a new student to master essay writing but once achieved they will be required to go on demonstrating the same skill and the only change will be having to write something much longer at the end. And, furthermore, no-one but the tutor will ever read it.

Why we should not adopt this mode

If HEIs work like this they will be disregarding and disrespecting the professional and reinforcing the prejudices of those that think universities look down on others from the tops of ivory towers. And they will not be in a position to demonstrate that what they do has any kind of impact upon what happens in a school classroom.

Why we might retain some of it

We might ask what is wrong with the essay as at least one of a range of modes of assessment. It has stood the test of time. It can be a disciplined piece of work exploring a field, examining literature, weighing arguments and arriving at a well founded conclusion. And our familiarity with it as a form enables us to examine and grade it relatively unproblematically.

And what can be wrong in a student stepping outside the narrow concerns and obsessions of everyday professional life? It can be refreshing to exercise the mind in a place apart.

Mode Two: Instrumental Orthodox

Capturing the professional

What does it look like?

When Ralph Tabberer was leading the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and turning it into the Training and Development Agency for schools (TDA) he used to refer to the National Standards that were then being revised as the 'lever' for CPD. Archimedes is reported to have said, 'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum to place it and I shall move the earth.' so my reaction to hearing that word was to try to identify the force and the fulcrum that go with the National Standards lever. For a 'force' we have inspection (now coming down heavily on the 'below average' and the merely 'satisfactory'); and we also have pay, pay progression and promotion which are closely dependent upon teachers being able to demonstrate that they are working to the standards. For a 'fulcrum' we have performance management review: a series of dialogues infused with references to targets: reaching them; failing to reach them; and how to remedy poor performance.

Colleagues that have worked in what government refer to as Initial Teacher Training (ITT) and others refer to as Initial Teacher Education (ITE) will know the word 'compliant'. It is one of those words that have been captured by government and reduced in meaning. Designing the suspension for a car an engineer will ensure that it can cope with a wide variety of surfaces and unexpected inputs. The word for that is 'compliance', implying having sufficient flexibility to cope in diverse contexts. For HEIs working to a government agenda, however, 'flexibility' is not the word that comes to mind. For them compliance means obedience to very rigid regulations and the achievement of externally imposed targets: a very stiff and bumpy suspension with lots of shocks. The alternative is failure, followed by unemployment. The choice is to comply or die.

Illustrating points by means of metaphor and analogy can, however, stretch the forbearance of the reader so before leaving this point I should mention that this business can also be looked at from a different viewpoint: whatever changes are made to regulations and whatever new targets are thrown at them with short notice HEIs must be flexible enough to comply.

Now that government has decided upon 'new' masters for all teachers starting with those at the beginning of their careers the question is will they apply the ITT compliance and target setting mindset to it?

UCET has negotiated a number of agreements with bodies carrying out programmes of professional learning that can complement masters degrees. The unique selling point of the masters is that it brings to such programmes critical

reflection from different perspectives, a wide literature, rigorous research processes and a willingness to accept dispute and challenge. I think that what we would get if we lose all this could easily be instrumental and orthodox; and the possibility that we might have masters degrees minus all that has made them special scares me on behalf of the teaching profession of which we are all members.

Among the factors operating here is a tendency by some people to imagine that credit should automatically be given for the normal work of school teachers: as though nothing extra needed to be done. I have often used the phrase 'normal work of teachers' myself when encouraging school teachers to become involved in masters work and I apologise to anyone to whom I did not make clear that I meant that this 'normal work' should be examined critically and seriously.

I suppose that my key question is what is it that would place a masters degree in the ***Instrumental Orthodox*** category?

Typical Mode(s) of Delivery

The emphasis would be on delivery in the work-place (that is not new). Analysis of professional needs would emerge from Performance Management Reviews which are based upon sets of national standards and targets and connected closely to pay, pay progression, promotion and the risk of failing inspection.

Having established a set of individual needs they would be related to the needs of the school which will be strongly influenced by national priorities and inspection reports. The result will probably produce a set of targets relating closely to pupil performance and some form of action research probably feeding into the Self-Assessment Form of the next year.

Every effort would be made to ensure that the normal school day was not disturbed. For that reason the time given over to accredited professional learning would be confined to so-called 'training days', directed time and the personal time of the individual. It is also likely that much of the 'normal' work of the individual would be included. This would be rationalised rather tendentiously as helping teachers to become participant observers and critical sense-makers of professional life; both of which roles should be encouraged when properly recognised and planned for but not otherwise. Employing the language of critical sense-making to cover up a lack of proper resourcing will do no good.

We can expect that in larger schools or across clusters of smaller ones there will be a team of teachers responsible for leading professional learning in a similar manner to initial teacher education. I have been calling this role the 'M-Coach' but surely we can think of something better.

The main issue is the sense-making framework employed to interrogate professional learning. For this mode of masters degree it is likely to be a received, approved and official framework (note ref the TDA guidance on evaluation).

Typical Mode(s) of Assessment

The role of HE would not be like it is for PPD where universities are increasingly planning with school teachers a variety of modules, programmes, assignments and modes of assessment. Instead the role will be to 'validate' what happens in schools which, I suspect, will be dominated by relatively small-scale action research.

In themselves small-scale pieces of work are very valuable. They can help participants to practise professionally useful skills of enquiry and they can lead to more sustained and more searching pieces of work. The kind of assignment generated by action research and submitted for examination can, however, be mistakenly thought to be straightforward and relatively un-problematic: timed, targeted and tidy. The reason for this is that with the *Instrumental Orthodox* kind of masters degree the purpose will be narrowly defined. There will, therefore, be no reason to ensure that a participant is progressively equipped with knowledge of a variety of modes of enquiry leading up to producing a substantial piece of work: the dissertation.

And, rather than looking *amongst* evidence, especially that which is unexpected, in order to examine its significance, the tendency will be to look *for* evidence that demonstrates that targets have been met. This will be poor quality work. In fact, limiting oneself to looking *for* evidence to meet a target or to prove a hypothesis is anti-intellectual and, in my view, tantamount to falsification. Much is made of the crime of plagiarism but failure to examine unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes is 'clerk's treason' (see below).

Arguments against

Unproblematized, de-theorized masters work employing few narrow perspectives is NOT masters work. Suppressing the critically informed and examined voice of school teachers is a betrayal of professional educators and of those that they serve.

Arguments for

It will address government policy and they are paying for it (not very much).

Mode Three: Socially Critical

Liberating the professional

What does it look like?

I have always admired Stephen Kemmis's book, *Towards the Socially Critical School (1983)* and have used it as the inspiration for the title of this argument: *The Socially Critical Teacher*.

In the early 1980s it did look as though all of the work being done on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies, curriculum-led staffing, political education (not citizenship which was rejected back in the 1970s as limiting personal political involvement to learning how to behave in an approved manner), low-attaining pupil projects, records of achievement and the entitlement curriculum might lead to better motivated teachers and pupils who could feel that they had contributed to decisions about what should be taught and how and what should be assessed and how. There seemed to me at the time to be such a build-up of momentum, helped by the raising of the school leaving age and comprehensivisation about ten years earlier, that we might at last transform the learning experiences of the majority of children from the negative to the positive; and that this might have a progressive effect upon society: might even help us to move towards social fairness and fulfilment (was I naïve?).

In those days rapidly rising unemployment was having a very big impact upon teaching, learning and assessment. In many parts of the country it was clear that in order to persuade young people to come to class (and stay there) what happened in schools had to be fulfilling in a variety of senses. It was not reasonable to tell children that they had to be there and to do the work set for them simply because you said so; it was very stupid of teachers to tell children that if they worked hard they would get a job because they were disappearing fast; it was not even sufficient for the school work expected of children to be relevant to their lives. What happened in the classroom also had to stimulate their imaginations and provide opportunity for a sense of fulfilment at a number of levels; just as it also had to for the teachers. There were thousands of Mode 3 CSE examinations where teachers were able to write their own syllabus, examination and mark scheme and submit them for approval. Seven examination boards and thirty three LEAs in the North of England collaborated on Records of Achievement and a scheme for validating units of accreditation written by teachers (note ref NPRA). Teacher and learner often moved closer to each other as joint participants in the learning experience; even as joint designers and sense-makers of the learning experience. The teacher was acquiring a realisation of how their role extended beyond the classroom experience of children.

We should be approaching that situation again with the extended school and with Every Child Matters which is why a masters degree that liberates the experience, expertise, interests, concerns and values of teachers (and those with whom they come into contact); that gives them voice; that explores uncharted territory; and that, if you like, brings into bloom the gifts and talents of all has to be the way forward.

I appreciate that I am looking back to a period of personal professional energy and expansion and may be in danger of thinking of it as a 'Golden Age'. I do know it was not quite so golden. In that time there remained much that I would regard as damaging to society in the form of selective grammar schools and the consequent negative labelling of 80% of the school population (and, having been judged to be a failure by the 11-Plus examination and having spent almost all of my school teaching career in secondary moderns, I admit to still being angry about negative labelling, particularly as I cling to my prejudice that we secondary modern teachers often valued the children we taught as people more highly than many grammar school teachers who thought first of their subjects).

The changes to the curriculum and to the modes of assessment and inspection imposed in the middle to late 1980s came with the force of law and they eventually put an end to experimentation. Headteachers who baulked at implementing these changes had to be reminded that Assessment Orders were literally that: 'orders'. In response I spent much time as an adviser working on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies trying to reconcile what we wanted to do with what we had to do and for a time it looked achievable. My personal slogan, chosen to keep me cheerful, was 'Let us humanise what we have to do while protecting and promoting what we want to do'.

So, although the period of the free-wheeling teacher able to take the curriculum in any direction (similarities to the *Traditional Academic* mode of masters) was coming to an end and being replaced by a regulated, uniform system of teaching, learning and assessment (akin to the *Instrumental Orthodox* masters degree), the early years of educational Thatcherism were very creative because people tried very hard to transform the instrumental orthodox into a vehicle for social good. Ultimately, of course, the forces of government, exerted particularly via inspection and league tables, first damped down and then almost extinguished any fire produced by enthusiastic teachers.

Deciding in favour of the *Socially Critical* mode of masters for teachers is, to me, crucial. In an area in which we have at least a little power we should exert ourselves to ensure that postgraduate awards for teachers encourage exploration, experimentation, controlled and supported risk-taking; a willingness to challenge and be challenged; the revelation and serious consideration of what can be learned from so-called failure; and the use of multiple perspectives including, especially, that of the impact upon society. We should also be encouraging the consideration of unexpected evidence for unintended outcomes.

And we should be establishing, articulating and obtaining a hearing for, at all levels, professional voices that have been critically examined.

Both the *Traditional Academic* and the *Instrumental Orthodox* are phases that we should have left behind. If the professionalism of teachers and associates is to be respected then we need a form of masters degree that helps them to articulate and obtain a hearing for their voice: that helps them to make more sense of the circumstances in which they work: that, instead of suppressing, liberates their informed critical voice.

Typical Mode(s) of Delivery

They would be mixed and arise from negotiation not only between a university and a school or a school teacher but also between small groups, larger networks and related professionals. In fact the word 'delivery' can mislead because there will be opportunity for reflexive professional learning, meaning that the relationship is less that of tutor and student and more that of joint participants in learning. It might be better to say 'Mode of Learning' as a better descriptor for what can happen.

Socially critical professional learning of this kind will ensure that contextualisation happens and that more perspectives are made use of. What we might call 'student participants' will not only learn to employ theory to shine a light upon practice but they will also be enabled to use their critical examination of practice to challenge theory; even to construct theory. The same should be true of policy particularly since ECM means that the social impact of school teaching is increasingly happening through collaboration with related professionals.

'Tutor participants' will be planning intervention in the professional learning of others (a phrase often used by teachers of English to describe their role in the language development of pupils) and also taking the opportunity to acquire new knowledge. The roles of tutor participants will not be confined to making new learning available and possible but will also include helping with dissemination: helping to organise the learning from the learning; encouraging the articulation of a critically examined professional voice; and obtaining a hearing for this voice.

We might take this further and include the school-based leaders of professional learning. Their participation in the process will ensure that at least three perspectives are brought to bear upon professional learning: the view(s) of school teachers working as individuals or as members of small groups; the multiple views of the HE tutor(s) who connect with national and international knowledge and theory; and the leader(s) of professional learning who can ensure that the view from the school is brought to bear and enable research to take place.

Typical Mode(s) of Assessment

While these are likely to be varied in order to reflect differing professional contexts they will continue to be subject to examination against criteria that are common across all HEIs. With variety comes a need to ensure that assessment is designed to be fair for all.

We may expect, however, that school teachers (and others if government will allow them to) will be required to demonstrate that they have addressed the impact of their professional learning. In particular, I would expect to see more use of Critical Professional Learning Journals accompanied by Portfolios of Evidence for Impact. The portfolio can contain a variety of evidence and the critical professional learning journals provide the critical commentary upon the contents of the portfolio. This is not unlike the model for obtaining a PhD by publication. It has the benefit of allowing variety and professional relevance alongside rigorous critical questions and commentary.

A point worth making is that it is often the case that people make high-grade sense of low-grade CPD. For example, I have seen work done for the lowest level of the GTCE's Teacher Learning Academy (TLA) that was worthy of a masters and I have also seen work intended to match higher levels that was not subject to sufficient critical sense-making. It is possible to attend a briefing and simply take note of the essentials in order to report back. It is also possible for another person to attend the same event and to see the wider implications. Obtaining a masters degree is not just about acquiring more information; it is also about learning how to see with a well-tuned critical eye.

There is, by the way, ample evidence that all of this already takes place in PPD. What we are lacking is any evidence that policy-makers at the highest levels wish to understand it or to allow the voices of professionals working in education to emerge from a process of critical examination of their own learning.

Concepts and Critical Questions

1. Critical sense-making

Without becoming too hung up on linguistics could replacing the word 'understanding' by the phrase 'sense-making' be useful to you? What is changed if you add the word 'critical'?

2. Academic

What does this word mean to you? Might it imply something obscure and out of reach? Might it imply something disconnected from reality? Can you find any good value in the word? Might you perceive the word differently if you put it

alongside, say, the word 'vocational' to describe different routes or streams or qualifications for children and young people? Does its value change for you if you do this?

3. Clerks' Treason

This is often written in French as 'Traison des clerc'. It is meant to mean treason of the intellectuals. It might help here to think of a group which has espoused certain principles, beliefs and values lowering itself to accept or go along with behaviour which it should be rejecting. Put another way, if you wish to call yourself a teacher or an educator are there some things that you simply should not accept? If so what might they be?

How, for example, do you feel about selecting just a very few children as Gifted and Talented and what label do you give to the unselected children? How do you feel about accepting the extra money to be a specialist school when you are supposed to be providing a broad and balanced curriculum? How do you feel about selection in general? How do you feel when you neglect to examine potentially valuable evidence from your professional learning because you have already got what you want to meet your targets? And do you wish to have a reputation for always being compliant?

Propositions for consideration

1. The role of professional educator is critical to society.
2. Theorists must listen to the voice of professional educators.
3. Theorists are also professional educators.
4. Policy-makers must listen to the voice of professional educators.
5. Policy-makers have to listen to other voices.
6. The voice of professional educators only becomes worth listening to when it emerges from informed critical examination of professional learning.