Beyond compliance;

accountability assessment and anxiety, and curricular structures to help students engage with troublesome knowledge

Peter Hadfield (University of Bedfordshire)

James Atherton

Abstract

In recent years a "compliance culture", characterised by detailed prescription of systems, has come to dominate professional and vocational education, and the practice of teaching and assessment in that sector.

Some forms of professional education cannot successfully be undertaken under such a culture, and learning is severely inhibited if programmes cannot tolerate the risk inherent in experimentation. In terms of organisational culture, the compliance approach serves to mitigate the anxiety characteristic of working in a target-driven environment, but at the cost of distorting the task.

It is argued that any solutions need to operate at the level of the overall curriculum, with a dynamic accommodation between reified components and participatory processes (following Wenger 1998). A model is explored, based independently on cultural history (Steiner, 2004) and on the psychodynamics of organisations (Menzies, 1965; Bion, 1970) which suggests what it means to manage such an accommodation.

Introduction: The Creation of the Compliance Culture

Compliance is conformity to the demands of an external controlling force, and so any discussion of a "compliance culture" needs to take into account the nature of that control, and what makes it so powerful. The growth of detailed regulation in professional education has been considerable in the past twenty years, and has accelerated over the past ten. In nursing, for example, plans to enhance the status of practitioners through higher levels of qualification have paralleled similar moves for social workers (NMC, 2004; DoH, 2002). In both cases the new qualifications have been characterised not only by increased prescription of curriculum content, but by similarly more explicit "standards" for assessment of practical work, and also requirements about the forms of partnership between Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and the employers and providers of practical placements.

Parallel initiatives may be found in other fields. Even teaching in higher education has been affected in a tentative way, through the HE Academy standards (HEA, 2006). And as documented by Nasta (2007) the impact of the approach on teacher education in the post-compulsory sector has been considerable.

Alongside the increasing strength of professional bodies, the educational insitutions themselves have been subject to increased regulation and inspection, through Ofsted (in Further Education and teacher education in universities) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, 2003).

The inspecting agencies have of course worked closely with the funding bodies; and nowhere is the link closer than in Further Education. The Learning and Skills Councils have until recently taken a very active role in the management of FE provision through the control of funding to colleges, which they control through the payment of fees on the basis of student numbers. Those numbers are counted on three occasions throughout the year, including the numbers passing the intended qualification, so recruitment, retention and "achievement" and progression of students onto more advanced courses are critical to the sheer survival of FE colleges.

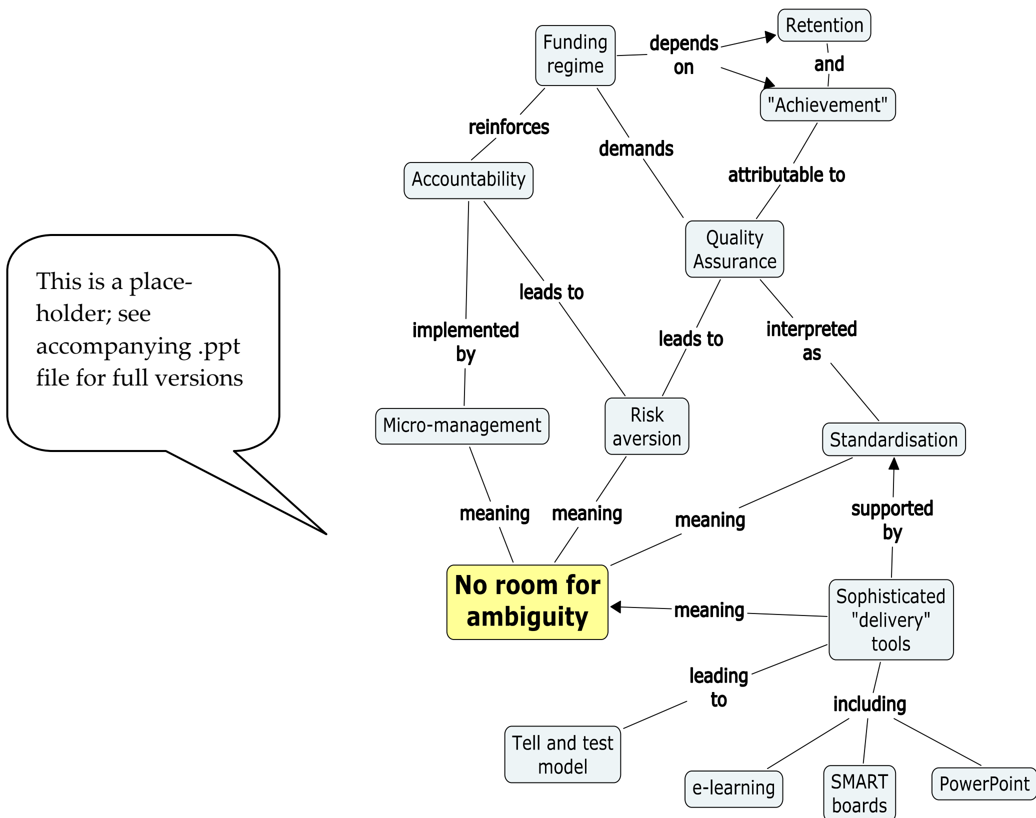

Figure 1: The perfect storm

Importantly, what counts as "success" is increasingly defined in terms of supposedly measurable outputs, from the student numbers all the way through to the use of "SMART" lesson objectives[1].

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[1] Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, Time-constrained (this is only one variant from Woolhouse *et al*, 2001, but "M" is always "measurable").

This is not the place to explore all the unintended consequences of such a funding mechanism, but among them is certainly the rise of a risk-averse approach to management, with ever closer control being exercised over staff roles and teaching practices (Coffield, 2008). At the micro-level of the classroom, this is reinforced by the technology which is ubiquitous in the “delivery” of the teaching, and by the documentation (schemes of work, session plans, group profiles, student personal development plans) which needs always to be available for management or Ofsted inspection.

It is not therefore surprising to find that although the first national standards for teaching in FE did not emerge until 1999 (the FENTO standards) the sector has enthusiastically embraced prescription in teacher training (Nasta, 2007). The HEA has six areas of activity, six areas of core knowledge and six professional values for its Fellowship status. Lifelong Learning UK has 41 “outcomes” and 108 “assessment criteria” in its standards (DfES, 2004).

As the concept map on the previous page (Figure 1) illustrates, the mutually-reinforcing influences conspire to creat a “perfect storm”—in the absence of countervailing factors—of concern for certainty of outcome, consistency, clarity and compliance.

It is not our concern here to discuss these policies and cultures *per se* but to explore their impact on an aspect of professional education and the issues in addressing them. In so doing it is important to bear in mind that there are many different possible levels of analysis in this discussion, from the broadly political and economic factors influencing policy at the sector and insitutional levels touched on already, down to the decision-making about practice and pedagogy at the level of the course and the classroom. Although we believe that the “perfect storm” analogy draws attention to the mutually reinforcing factors at all levels, it does perhaps make it more difficult to disentangle these levels. We have chosen to adopt theoretical frameworks which we find most illuminating at the level of practice in teacher education in the sector.

Implications for teacher education programmes

The impact of a compliance culture on teacher education (in the PCET sector) is problematic for several reasons;

First, in order to construct a curriculum which demands compliance, there needs to be a clear basis for it. In some technical areas, such as some forms of engineering or construction, and in some necessarily co-operative and team-based activities, it is indeed possible to map the necessary and sufficient conditions for the satisfactory performance of a task. In cases where safety is paramount, such as the administration of a drug-round in nursing, it is obligatory to do so.

But teaching is not like that, as Nasta argues (2007). It requires autonomy and flexibility. There is really surprisingly little research on how "training" and professional development programmes actually affect the practice of teachers in PCE, but Strivens (2007), for example, suggests that "scholarship" and "theory" in teacher education programmes in HE, at least, is substantially irrelevant to their practice. It is but a short step to acknowledging that we really do not know what we ought to teach in teacher education programmes, such that they would make a difference to practice. (Beyond, of course, fairly basic technical skills such as operating the data projector.)

So for all their increasing specificity and prescription, the "standards" are not—and perhaps could not be—based on empirical evidence. They are however based on employers' beliefs about what their employees, seen as interchangeable functionaries rather than autonomous professionals, should do[2]. The lack of empirical data as to what teachers, as practitioners, need, may of course account in some measure for the passion with which the prescriptions are embraced by their proponents[3].

Some components of practice can of course be specified, as in the case of operating the data projector, but even the discourse of competence-based qualifications recognises that that which can be specified is necessarily at a low level of expertise (Hyland, 1994). The specifications for the National Qualifications Framework, for example, speak of practitioners qualified at higher levels being capable of working under conditions of uncertainty, where by definition detailed practice algorithms cannot be specified.

Indeed, Wenger (1998) makes the point that sophisticated practice in any discipline has emergent components, and that these cannot be designed in to a taught programme;

> …increasingly detailed prescriptions of practice carry increasing risks of being turned around, especially when a form of institutional accountability is tied to them. Indeed, the response of satisfying (or giving the appearance of satisfying) the prescription may be at odds in fundamental ways with its design intents, as when students focus on test taking instead of the subject matter, or when managers push their quota instead of taking care of business.
>
> (Wenger, 1998: 233)

Bateson implies a similar point in his discussion of Learning II (1973).

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2 This is explicit in the formulation of new qualifications (DTLLS and CTLLS for those who want to know) according to the roles required of staff (DfES, 2004).

3 Douglas, 1966, pointed out that the conceptual boundaries which are most passionately and fiercely defended are frequently those which are least "natural" or supported by evidence.

Second, and from a slightly different angle, the compliance agenda suggests that it is possible to have courses whose outcomes are certain or guaranteed. In FE in general, the assumption is that *if* learners have been recruited to courses appropriate to them (*i.e.* often those which will not challenge them too much), *and* those courses have been "delivered" in compliance with their specifications and approved schemes of work, *then* satisfactory "achievement" (getting the award) is inevitable.

It is not so much that this cannot happen in teacher education, although it is unlikely—it is that to aim for such assured outcomes entails the elimination of risk. And it can be argued that all learning which matters is in some measure risky; this is at the heart of the "threshold concepts" model, which explores how engaging with a threshold concept brings the learner to a "liminal space", which is likely to be experienced as anxiety-provoking and risky (Meyer and Land, 2006). Indeed, the learner may draw back from crossing the threshold. But a completely safe and certain learning environment would preclude engagement with threshold concepts, and thereby abort the possibility of learning at any profound level.

The ontological shift implied in "becoming a teacher" is for many people a profound one (*cf.* Bathmaker and Avis, 2005). Even the very first of the LLUK standards reads;

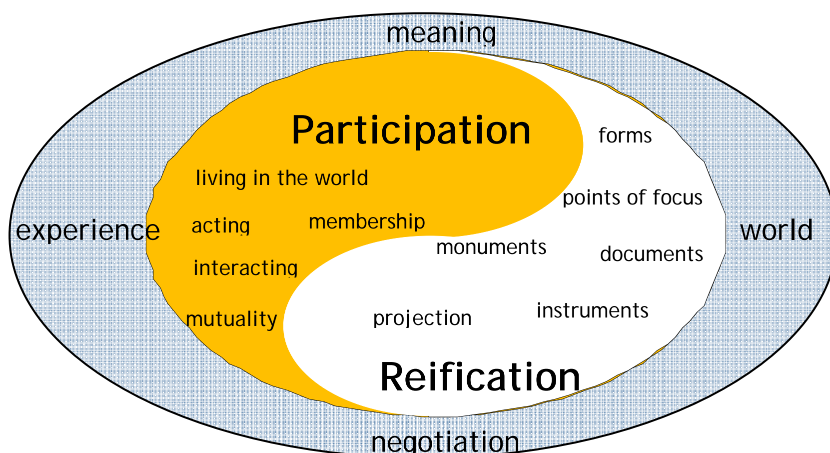
> Understand own role, responsibilities and boundaries of role in relation to teaching.
>
> (LLUK, 2007:23)

What does that mean? It can involve an ongoing debate and discussion about what it means to teach, using a philosophical, political or cultural discourse. Or it can be a review of the job description contained in the standard college contract within the discourse of "Human Resources". That is much less interesting, but increasingly the framework within which the outcome is being addressed.

Why does this matter? It matters in part because of the messages which are sent to students by courses which are all about compliance. It also matters because the course is in danger of being sucked into reinforcing and reproducing the compliance agenda. Teacher education tutors model attitudes and values to their students which those students will in turn model to their learners.

Illuminating perspectives

In exploring the implications of this situation and approaches to addressing it, we shall draw on several different but complementary perspectives, suited to relatively fine-grained analysis of programme management and participation.



Based on Wenger E (1998) *Communities of Practice* Cambridge; CUP p. 63

Figure 2

Mention has already been made of Wenger's exploration of the features of communities of practice (1998). He identifies several constructs within such communities, which he emphasises are not values in opposition, but complementary features. One of these is the "participation/reification" construct; the reified features of the community of practice are its structural elements, from physical buildings to manuals of procedure, which determine what and how things are done. The participation of members, however, is what makes the community function; without that the reified structures are impotent.

From the preceding discussion, it is clear that the compliance culture is far more inclined to emphasise reification than participation. It is all about product rather than process. When Wenger identifies "forms" as examples of reification, for example, he is not referring to Plato; he means pieces of paper laid out in a specific format to require specific information. This is the way in which the values—or more accurately the procedures which derive from them—take concrete representation and dictate the nature of the community of practice.

But he emphasises that the reified objects of the community exist in a dialectical relationship with their complement—the fluid processes of participation. These are the transitory conversations and relationships, and the habitual patterns of relating which are the counterparts of the structures.

It is clear that, for example, it would be possible for a participatory sub-culture to subvert the reified processes of the community. (Academics are good at this.) Equally, the Jamie Targetts and Jennifer Doubledays of this world are always trying naively to enlist the participatory aspect in the

service of the reified structure[4]. However, that is not the issue on which we wish to focus here.

It can easily be argued that in order to generate an effective community of practice within a course, more attention needs to be paid to the participatory aspect. That is certainly seen as being an important component of any teacher education programme, but it has to be acknowledged that compliance is as much a component of the participatory side as it is of the reified side.

Compliance shows itself in the partipatory component in respect of the management of anxiety. Several themes are coming together in the argument at this point. Passing reference has already been made to nursing, in which detailed specification of practice and compliance with it is seen as obligatory for reasons of safety and accountability. Menzies (1965) identified many years ago from a psycho-analytic perspective how many aspects of nurse-training at that time were driven by the need to contain the anxieties of young women (as they practically all were) coming into close contact with people who were sick, suffering and even dying. Thus the rotation of short ward placements and the focus on tasks rather than patients, and the de-personalisation of patients ("the gall-stones in bed thirteen") all served to create psychological distance from distressing aspects of the job, or in short, defences against anxiety. (The extent to which present systems in current nurse training successfully manage anxiety remains a topic of debate among those in the field.)

No-one would wish to argue that teaching, particularly in post-16 education, engenders the same levels of anxiety as found in acute nursing, but nevertheless we have seen the extent to which the sector is imbued with anxiety, created by the funding and inspection regimes in place. This is increasingly the case in relation to new initiatives, such as the 14-19 Diplomas, introduced as we write, whose viability has been contested (Education and Skills Select Committee, 2007), but which will be used as criteria to judge the performance of colleges and individual staff, creating a "double bind"

The response has been to increase control and hence to emphasise compliance (Worrall, 2008). College managements are subject to this process (see Coffield 2008) to the extent that they no longer see teaching and learning as the first priority. The professional bodies are subject to it, to the extent that Coffield shows that they themselves have been incapable of learning that one of their great shibboleths, the dogma of "learning styles" in his words, "…should be a dead parrot. It should have ceased to function." (2008:32). Tutors on teacher education programmes are subject to it, in the way they "deliver" courses

[4] See http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/section.asp?navcode=110

according to formulaic recipes endorsed by Ofsted; they cannot then be criticised. And as noted, the defensive culture is inherited by the students.

It is not enough to encourage everyone simply to "lighten up" a little. The pressures and the anxieties are real, but unless some way can be found to address them and also allow students to experiment and fail, and to find their own ways to inhabit the role of the teacher, graduates will become ever more mechanistic and sterile in their approach, and incapable of enthusing their own learners (see Bathmaker and Avis, 2005).

Just as Wenger identified complementary issues of participation and reification existing in a dialectical tension, so it is possible to discover complementary components of security and freedom, of discipline and autonomy, within curricular structures.

These have been examined in very similar ways by two very different writers. Bion (1970) approaches the phenomenon in relation to groups and institutions from a very similar psychoanalytic (indeed, Kleinian) perspective as did Menzies in relation to her case-study of nursing. One of the present authors has used Bion's framework to illuminate a case-study of a PCET teacher education programme (Atherton, 2000). The cultural critic and historian of the arts, George Steiner (2003) on the other hand finds the process in relationships between artists and their pupils.

Bion's account is marginally more explicit and easier to explain (neither is easy, and this account may well simplify unto banality). He postulates the metaphor of the container and the contained (one could say "content", but that is far too inert). The relationship between the two can take, he says, three forms; commensality, parasitism, and symbiosis.

Commensality simply means "sharing the same table", existing in parallel but not interacting. It is of no interest other than that it accounts for a large proportion of all containing processes in the world.

Parasitism, however, can take two forms, both of which are also identified by Steiner. The term itself is a little misleading—one component feeding off or merely exploiting the other is not the process described. Rather, one element destroys the other.

First, the *container can destroy the contained*. (The master can destroy the pupil.) A contaminated vessel can poison its contents. An air-tight cage can suffocate an animal inside. And of course a dominating superior can stifle a subordinate. A rigid structure can subdue its members.

But second, the *contained can destroy the containe*r. Bion speaks of the rebel or the messiah against whom the walls of the institution cannot stand. The pressure of gas within a vessel causes it to explode. The chemical eats its way through its container.

As Steiner puts it more eloquently;

> Masters have destroyed their disciples both psychologically and, in rarer cases, physically. They have broken their spirits, consumed their hopes, exploited their dependence and individuality. The domain of the soul has its vampires. In counterpoint, disciples, pupils, apprentices have subverted, betrayed and ruined their Masters.
>
> (Steiner, 2003:2)

What Bion does not go on to explore is that when the contained destroys the container, it too is likely to "die", because it was dependent on the container for its structure.

So the third possibility is *symbiosis*. However, that is largely an aspirational state, and there is little exploration of what it means in practice. Bion indeed comments;

> "In the symbiotic relationship there is a confrontation and the result is growth-producing though that growth may not be discerned without some difficulty"
>
> (Bion, 1970:78)

He does go on to point out that whetever symbiosis is, it is not "respectable" (1970: 78). It does not present as a bland and static equilibrium.

So—back to compliance and curricula. The Menzies case-study, and the compliant curricula in PCET today, can be seen as examples of the container severely inhibiting and impairing, if not actually destroying, the contained. The contained may be "learning", or learners' motivation, or aspirations, or a number of other like things.

It is more difficult to think of example of the container destroying the contained, at least in the current climate. But it may be manifest in the individual actions of rebellious or (Bion's term) "mystical" students who simply give up.

> In the late '80s one of the present authors was responsible with a colleague for the design of an in-service course for school-teachers on "social and pastoral responsibility". They decided that instead of having a conventional structure, it could be tuned most closely to the needs of the participants by basing it on Personal Construct Psychology, as mediated by Thomas and Harri-Augstein (1985). By the fourth week of the programme, attendance had dropped from twelve to four, and even those four were bewildered. Frankly neither of the tutors were skilled or knowledgeable enough to bring it off, and the participants felt insecure, with no assurances that it would all come out well in the end. In the terms of the present discussion, the structure (the reified elements) was not strong enough to contain (or simply re-assure) the uncertainties of the participants (just the right word, here); so they left.

So what does symbiosis look like? Can it be reified?

Symbiosis recognises that container and contained need each other. They don't have to like each other. Above, Bion mentions confrontation; it implies a dialectic. So the container needs to work in such a way as to contain anxiety enough to allow the contained to engage with it.

The reified structures (containers, here) need to facilitate a style of participation which engages with uncertainty and anxiety rather than tries to legislate uncertainty out of existence. They need to communicate not, "You can't fall" but "If you fall, I'll catch you".

> This distinction can be illustrated by an experience on the PGCE/Cert Ed programme. It includes a series of Study Days, which this year addressed the discovery of, and approaches to teaching, threshold concepts within the disciplines. The area in which the students had most difficulty dealing with threshold concepts was Health and Safety. Groups in construction, engineering, catering and social care all identified that "healthandsafety" was a threshold concept. Without going into the definitions of threshold concepts, it isn't. Recognition of risk and its management probably is. But to practitioners of these disciplines, if "healthandsafety" were to be taught in any way other than the most didactic and prescriptive, there was a risk learners might not get the Right Answers, and they might therefore be at risk themselves… So the compliant approach is counter-productive and aborts learning (see Atherton, 2008).

A more sophisticated approach, looking at the dimensions of risk and informed decision-making, would make it possible for learners to apply their learning in a wider range of situations. Instead of being taught required safety measures by rote, they might consider the probability of an adverse event, its seriousness should it occur, the effort required to deal with it, and how the three interact. But at another level, that is perceived as a risky strategy for the college.

Under such circumstances it is only as the container is strengthened in an appropriate way that the contained can flourish in its own, not necessarily compliant, way. Thus clear and accurate information about such aspects of the curriculum as scheduling of sessions, contact details for tutors and course regulations conveys a message of competence and authority, in turn making it clear that where procedures seem vague or confusing, that is not because the tutors and managers do not know what they are doing. If, as Flanagan, Taylor and Meyer (2008) point out, those managing the experience can re-assure participants (tutors as well as students on occasion) that disorientation and anxiety are normal for a given stage of the programme, but that they can be assured it will all pay off and work in the end, then they will be encouraged to see the process through.

In the absence of such assurances, they may well remain inhibited in their response to the opportunities and challenges offered.

How these features are incorporated into practical curricula will vary according to circumstances, but there are some established approaches which embody the principles, such as enquiry-, and more particularly problem-based learning (see *inter al.* Boud and Feletti, 1998; Savin-Baden, 2000), action-research (Whitehead and McNiff, 2006) and action-learning (Beaty and McGill, 2001), and negotiated contract-based study (Anderson, Boud and Samson, 1996).

All these approaches, and others, are clear about the extent to which

- learning is in the hands of the students
- failure in a particular task is a real possibility, but does not imply or entail failure in a programme overall
- optimal anxiety (Apter, 2007) is facilitated…
- …through the creation of clear working and containing structures.

Thus far from being "free-for-all", each of the above approaches and others has developed (often on the basis of action-research on emerging practice) a series of tested and distinctive special features (which do of course sometimes degenerate into preciousness), which are neglected at the peril of all. Thus the action-learning "set", the action-research cycle, the formulation of the "problem" (action learning would call it a "puzzle") for problem-based learning, the format of the contract and the manner of its negotiation (so often distorted and hi-jacked in PCET today) all serve as reified structures which facilitate participation. They confer confidence to experiment and to take some risks, while making it clear that students are preserved from the destructive consequences of failure. It is by no means easy to guarantee, but they may also appear to college management, looking at courses from the outside, to underwrite their view of course "quality".

However, as Bion and Steiner explored, there is a possibility not only of insufficient reified structure exposing management, tutors and students to paralysing anxiety, but also of too heavy a structure stultifying learning; and if our analysis is correct that is the more common problem. This model does not suggest any instant answers, but it does indicate a framework within which the debate may be conducted, so as to set limits within which there can be a constructive oscillation between priority given to compliance and autonomy, reification and participation.

Note; *the authors would like to thank Tony Nasta of the Institute of Education for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper*

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(Abstract, 145; Main text 3,961; Overall total inc. bibliography, 4,880)

Keywords: teaching, curriculum, teacher education, post-compulsory education, compliance.

Correspondence; atherton.james@gmail.com