

# Interview: the *Dancing Princesses* project\*

*(This interview was organised, conducted and transcribed by a member of the PSE editorial board in a personal capacity.)*

**T**he *Dancing Princesses* trilogy (DPT) of books - *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses* (2015), *The Principal: Power and Professionalism in Further Education* (2017), and *Caliban's Dance: Further Education After the Tempest* (2020) - is a powerful and novel contribution to the debate on further education. Each edited collection takes a metaphorical hook to explore issues of critical practice, power and the possibility of a different kind of FE. There is no single perspective running through the series; its contributors have many different views. Nonetheless, the trilogy is motivated by a fierce commitment to FE as a lively democratic space and to social justice. I talked to the trilogy's three editors - Maire Daley, Kevin Orr and Joel Petrie - about it.

*First of all, congratulations on a real accomplishment: beautifully designed, a hundred contributors - practitioners, academics and students; a powerful mix of humour and seriousness; utopian but firmly grounded in experience; organised around a series of metaphorical hooks. What was the inspiration?*

The idea for a metaphorical approach came from a frustration at the pretty ubiquitous use of 'the Cinderella Sector' to describe FE, and an irritation about the deficit and gendered nature of the metaphor. Joel had tracked the use of Cinderella as part of some post-graduate research as far back as the 1930s, and asked Maire if she knew its origin (at the time they were teacher educators together). Maire suggested a far better Grimm fairy tale to reflect FE would be the twelve dancing princesses - subversive and collective. The idea crystallised on a train journey to Huddersfield (we were part of the teacher education university consortium). Joel knew Kevin Orr's work on FE, and we invited him to join the project, in part because we felt a coalition of voices from FE and HE could be fertile. But there was a great deal of serendipity in the first and subsequent books

really, much of it was very organic rather than carefully planned.

*Each of the books has a different slant. You start with the subversion of the Princesses and follow with power of the Principal, whilst Caliban imagines what might be possible in a freer FE system. Could you elaborate a little on the approach?*

We had not planned beyond the first book but the metaphors of princesses and dancing we adopted for that book proved to be very productive in how our contributors applied them to their chapters. Writing with the metaphor was an enjoyable discipline and the use of metaphor distinguished the book and subsequently the trilogy. Joel was the one who encouraged us to produce a second and third book and he came up with Machiavelli's *The Prince* and then *The Tempest* so that we would examine FE as it is, including the spaces for subversion and flair; leadership of all kinds within FE; and finally imagined futures for FE. The metaphors enabled others to think about FE in quite diverse ways, even where the interpretation of the metaphor was disputed. Some of our writers saw Machiavelli as warning against the prince, others that he was in the service of the prince. That didn't matter because the shared metaphor allowed diversity whilst also allowing the editors to shape the books into some coherence.

A distinctive feature of the series is the contribution of students - captioned photographs of student dancers in volume one, illustrations for each of the chapters in volumes 2 and 3. They certainly make the books very attractive but what was the thinking here?

Again, this dynamic of the series developed organically rather than being explicitly planned. We decided to include the student dancers, and quotes from them about FE, as the first book developed. The feeling was that research on FE

rarely involves professionals working in the sector, and FE student input is rarer still. For *The Principal* we wanted to replicate the approach, initially by inviting a chapter by the then NUS president. The student illustrations came later as a result of meeting Curtis Tappenden at an *FE Transforms* conference. Curtis teaches art and design to FE students and we were so pleased with what his students produced to illustrate *The Principal* we replicated it in *Caliban's Dance*, the final book of the trilogy. Part of the thinking was to demonstrate the potential input of less explicitly academic vocational areas in an analysis of FE, and the use of images also tied in with the overall metaphorical approach.

*There is a view that practitioner 'voices' are often unheard in the sector. This was a motivation behind the Tutor Voices initiative and is an issue in the argument for FE-based research. How far did the trilogy succeed in opening up some space for practitioners?*

That was a strong motivation for us and we certainly enabled some voices to be heard from inside the sector because each of the books has contributions from practitioners. We would have liked more. We may have opened a little space for FE-based writers, and we are pleased that some have gone on to write elsewhere, but the argument for FE-based research remains. Certainly, each of our contributors has a strong relationship with FE and has a commitment to the sector, but writing and especially research takes time and FE practitioners seldom have enough.

*A strength of the trilogy is its open and pluralist approach. But do you have a sense of the differences or tensions that emerge from the contributions in terms of what is needed to change the sector and create 'spaces to dance in'?*

There is no single *Dancing Princesses* manifesto but all of our writers would share a broad conception of social justice and would agree that FE has been too often misunderstood and remains under-funded. We editors never wanted to fall into the trap of asking FE to transform our unequal society that is reflected in an education system that systematically marginalises FE precisely because it serves working-class students. Transforming FE will not necessarily lead to better jobs being available for FE students, for example, no matter how well taught or qualified they are. You are right, though, that there are tensions between the different visions of and for the sector in the books, and we want to promote debate

about how FE is run and in whose interests. That is also why students are to the forefront of each of the books.

*The trilogy resonates with other initiatives - the Re-Imagining FE conferences, UCU's Transforming Lives project, various online communities all come to mind. Perhaps it also draws attention to the divide between traditional union-based activism in FE, on the one hand, and critical debate about pedagogy and the kind of sector we want, on the other. The first is focused on important issues of conditions and pay; the second can feel disconnected from the everyday concerns of time-poor, overworked FE teachers who are not expected to and often don't engage in critical thinking about the sector. How does the trilogy address this divide?*

We do believe that promoting an engaging and critical pedagogy should be a trade union issue as much as winning decent conditions and pay for FE staff and many of our contributors have been closely involved in *Re-Imagining FE* and *Transforming Lives*. The divide you mention is damaging because it can be used to suggest that activists only care about protecting their own employment situation and do not care about their students. We certainly hope that the *Dancing Princesses* trilogy demonstrates that trade union and other activists are committed to improving the sector but an FE teacher with a huge workload is unlikely to be able to pay much attention to, for example, critical pedagogy. Coping can be hard enough. So, campaigning for better conditions can rightly be seen as part of a campaign to enable practitioners to better support their students and to improve the whole sector. The positive response to the *Dancing Princesses* trilogy suggests that there are very many in FE who are of the same opinion.

\* Daley, M., Orr, K. and Petrie, J. (Eds) (2015) *Further Education and the Twelve Dancing Princesses*. London: Trentham Books, 204pp

- (2017) *The Principal. Power and Professionalism in FE*. London: Trentham Books, 248pp

- (2020) *Caliban's Dance. FE after the Tempest*. London: Trentham Books, 234pp.

