

Towards the socially critical educator

Cliff Jones *looks at three modes of masters degree on offer for educators*

From their out-of-date perceptions of university life some politicians construct a caricature that I call the **obscure academic** masters degree, one believed to: disregard the professionalism of educators; lecture at them; make theory inaccessible; and lock them in a library until they come out with lots of essays and a dissertation that no-one wants to read. I believe that perception remains strong.

Their second model I call the **instrumental official** masters degree. It: captures professionals and makes them instruments of policy (often very bad and rapidly changing policy); emphasises standards, targets, value for money, competition, inspection, avoidance of failure and implementing official models of teaching, learning and assessment; and concentrates upon measuring what educators are told to measure. Ed Balls tried to impose that model.

My preferred model I call the **socially critical** masters. This: liberates the professional; acknowledges the experience, expertise, values, interests, fears and concerns of educators; and engages with and constructs theory and policy. Educators become critical partners in society rather than processors of students whose success and failure is denoted by the grade of quality stamped on the end product.

Should governments be frightened of educators 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 profession: one 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.

As for that appalling word used in the USA, educators are not instructors!

Obscure academic - disregarding the professional

Essentially, this kind of masters degree (and doctorate) is perceived by policy-makers to be irrelevant. Government, however, has a tendency to regard as relevant to the professional lives of educators only that supporting the implementation of policy.

Rather than being a professional sense-making process, or even a process of delivering an official orthodoxy, the perceived emphasis of the 'obscure academic' kind of professional learning is upon acquisition of and respect for the knowledge of academics (also disparaged as 'theorists'). Governments like Academies; they do not like academics (part of Michael Gove's 'blob').

Having done lots of external examining, designed and validated masters programmes, reviewed and evaluated education departments, read lots of impact evaluation reports, undergone inspection, talked to numerous colleagues (most of whom have also been school or college educators) and lost count of how many educators I have taught I can

say that I encounter very little evidence that this mode of masters is anything like dominant within education departments in HE, though it remains as a kind of ghost of masters past and thrives in other university departments. It is, furthermore, more than thirty years since I did my own masters in education. I found it to be very relevant and useful in my professional life. I believe the perception has been wrong-headed for quite some time.

It remains, however, highly significant in the minds of policy-makers.

Modes of assessment are seen as one-dimensional essays and dissertations. Once mastery of essay writing is achieved students are required to go on demonstrating the same skill, writing something longer at the end. Furthermore, no one but the tutor will ever read it.

We must, however, admit that the essay 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.

Also, 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.

So, having criticised the obscure academic mode of masters degree, I must admit that it has some usefulness and a lot of charm.

Instrumental orthodox **- capturing the professional**

Archimedes is reported to have said, 'Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum to place it and I shall move the earth'.

Policy comes with fulcrum, lever and force. For a fulcrum we have tests and examinations. For a lever we have the personal and professional consequences of failure for educators. For a force we have inspection.

An instrumental orthodox masters degree will be narrowly defined. 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'.

Unproblematized, de-theorized masters work confined to a few narrow perspectives is *not* masters

work. Suppressing the critically informed and examined voice of educators is a betrayal of professional educators and those that they serve.

Socially critical **- liberating the professional**

I have always admired Stephen Kemmis's (short) book, usually referred to as *Towards the Socially Critical School* (1983) and have used it as the inspiration for the title of this article: 'Towards the socially critical educator'.

In the early 1980s it looked to me as though all of the work being done on alternative curriculum and assessment strategies, curriculum-led staffing, political education (not citizenship which was rejected 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 educators and pupils/students 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 such a build-up of momentum, helped by the raising of the school leaving age and comprehensivisation about ten years earlier, that we might transform learning experiences from negative to positive; and that this might have a progressive effect upon society: might even help us move towards social fairness and fulfilment (was I naive?).

In those days rapidly rising unemployment was having a 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) education had to be fulfilling in a variety of senses. It was not reasonable to tell young people that they had to be there and do the work set for them simply because you said so; and it was very stupid of educators to say that if young people worked hard they would get a job because jobs were disappearing fast.

There were thousands of Mode 3 CSE examinations where teachers were able to write their own syllabus, examination and mark scheme to submit for approval. Seven examination boards and thirty-three LEAs in the North of England collaborated on a scheme for validating units of accreditation (modules) written by teachers. Teacher and learner often moved closer to each other as joint participants in, even as joint designers and sense-makers of, the learning experience. Some educators were realising how their role extended beyond the classroom.

The changes to the curriculum and to the modes of assessment and inspection imposed in the late 1980s, however, came with the force of law and suppressed experimentation and professional confidence. Assessment Orders concerning SATs were literally that: 'orders'. It was very difficult to explain to primary headteachers that both curriculum and assessment now came with the force of law. We had to accept a regulated, uniform system of teaching, learning and assessment, or else.

Choosing the socially critical mode of masters for educators is now, for me more than ever, crucial. In an area in which we have at least a little power to shape learning we should exert ourselves to ensure that postgraduate programmes for educators 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 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.

If the professionalism of educators is to be respected 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.

Socially critical professional learning of this kind will ensure that more perspectives are made use of. 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 it.

I would hope to see more use of critical professional learning journals accompanied by portfolios of evidence. 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 apparently low-grade professional experience. 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 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 of this. The International Professional Development Association (www.ipda.org.uk) has an archive of many of the Postgraduate Professional Development (PPD) annual impact evaluation reports written by universities. So do I. What we are lacking is any evidence that policy-makers at the highest levels wish to listen to the voices of professionals working in education. New Labour stopped up its ears, so did the Coalition Government, especially Michael Gove, and Theresa May's mind seems bent on the re-introduction of social stratification in the form of grammar schools. Obtaining a hearing is essential.

Propositions for discussion

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.