

Collegiate teaching and learning: a case study

Jane Speare investigates practice at Leyton Sixth Form College

This summer, in an article for the *Daily Telegraph*, John Yandell, of the University College London (UCL) Institute of Education, considered the consequences of the Government's relentless marketisation of education. Attacking 'the wholesale commodification' of schools and colleges in England and Wales, Yandell discussed how teachers' careers are being hijacked by a managerialist philosophy that fails to value teaching and learning for its own sake. In many schools and colleges teachers are now regarded as 'deliverers' of pre-packaged curriculum. Classroom teaching is seen as the bottom rung of a career ladder that leads to jobs in performance management or quality control. Yandell asks, 'Whatever happened to the notion that teachers might aspire to become better teachers? Whatever happened to the values of collegiality, of collective endeavour and mutual support?'

Leyton Sixth Form College in East London provides some interesting answers to Yandell's questions. In many ways it's a typical inner city sixth form college. It's well subscribed and, for a sixth form college, quite large, with over 2,000 students and 200 staff. Based in Waltham Forest – one of the most deprived boroughs in the capital – Leyton College offers a wide range of courses. The student cohort of 16-19 year olds is ethnically diverse, and many are entitled to free school meals. Kevin Watson has been principal since 2009. He characterises his overall philosophy as 'bringing the values of teaching and learning into the college rather than impose values down from management'. Colleges should be thought of as 'classrooms on a bigger scale'. One of Watson's main inspirations is Professor Viviane Robinson. Her 2011 book *Student Centred Leadership* advises leaders on ways to put improving teaching and learning at the centre of their work, and a copy is given to all teaching staff when they are employed. So how does the aim of building a college that values teaching above all translate in concrete terms? What does it mean for lecturing staff? In an interview for *PSE*, Kevin Watson outlined

some of the initiatives the college has adopted, and staff expressed their views. Some of the principles the college embraces and the practices it has adopted are explored below.

Have a healthy irreverence for Ofsted:

Rather than be guided explicitly by the ever-changing priorities of Ofsted, Leyton College has devised its own 'Ten key features of outstanding practice'. These effectively replace Ofsted criteria to guide the daily ethos and operations of the college. The features were drawn up by everyone in the college over a period of time following college-wide discussions and debates. Some of the key features, such as 'high standards' and 'equality and diversity' are obvious, and one would expect to see them in any college around the country. Other features are more unusual: 'care for staff' states that those working at the college are entitled to be 'guided and encouraged' in their professional development. A practical example of this is that everyone working at the college, from cleaners to senior managers, sets themselves a yearly challenge to improve what they do. These are known as quality improvements or QUIPs. Completion of a QUIP entitles staff to their performance-related pay, but their real significance lies in the fact that QUIPs encourage everyone to reflect on and develop their work in a way that makes sense to them.

Be obsessed with the craft of teaching – a shared model for observing teaching:

Teaching observations and assessments are, of course, a central feature of teaching life, endured but frequently resented and feared by teachers. Colleges have found a variety of ways to observe and assess teaching. Some employ special quality inspection teams whose job it has been to act as year-long Ofsted inspectors. Others ask senior staff

and departmental heads to observe teachers, and, although Ofsted no longer grade individual programme areas, many colleges still find it convenient to grade lessons. Unfortunately it's not unusual to find these grades linked to capability and performance targets. Leyton College has tried to take a different approach. Observations are never graded, and senior management are at pains to stress the developmental aspects of being observed. The principal personally observes all staff teaching. All members of staff sign up to one lesson so that they go with him as a joint observer. This means everyone has the chance to act as equal observers to another's lesson. In addition, lecturers get the chance to see people teaching and learning in departments other than their own. As soon as possible after their observation, the observed teacher discusses their lesson with the observers, and decides on actions to innovate, sustain or develop learning in their classes.

The intention of the whole process is what Watson calls 'benign development', although he acknowledges that it 'took time to build trust with staff because watching and surveillance can feel the same'. One way of doing this has been to give staff a choice between 'announced' observations, where they know the date and lesson in advance, and 'unannounced' observations where they don't. Clearly trust has developed, because in last year's observations all staff requested 'unannounced' observations.

Support intellectual curiosity:

Defining lecturers as 'curriculum deliverers' allows no scope for agency, and reduces the role of teaching to a technical exercise. Leyton College tries to do the opposite of this. Teaching is regarded as a craft and lecturers are encouraged to also be learners. Academic reading groups are held every half term, and all staff can join these should they want to. Interested staff are able to study for a post-graduate certificate in teaching and learning validated externally by a university. Essays written by staff have been posted on the intranet and taken to managers' meetings for discussion and dissemination. There are book and music clubs too, which offer enrichment for staff during lunch breaks.

Build a culture that is reflective and trusting:

One of the ten key features that Leyton tries to live by is 'sense of college'. This is the idea that everyone feels mutually responsible for the service that the college offers to students. Partly this is

intended to prevent petty inter-departmental hierarchies and encourage loyalty and communication between staff. It's also about trying to develop effective links between academic areas and support staff. Pinning down how a culture develops is hard to do, but the fact that staff are consulted on teaching and learning initiatives is obviously important. There is an assumption in this that people do not need micro-managing, and that teaching and learning is most effective when people work to their strengths and feel confident to set personal targets for their development.

Critics might argue that all of the above is very well but in the 'real world' of today's competitive education system practices such as Leyton's are an expensive indulgence. The college isn't perfect and every post-16 provider faces dilemmas and problems. Watson thinks that more work could be done to share cross-college initiatives, and it took time to win over some governors to his approach. Teaching staff who offered opinions for this article were broadly positive about QUIPs and observations, but some reflected that putting innovative teaching ideas into practice would always be difficult given time constraints and pressure from external exams. Some of the practices that work for Leyton, such as the principal seeing everyone teach, would be impossible for larger institutions, even if they thought them desirable.

What the example of Leyton College does suggest, however, is that there are alternatives to corporate managerialism. College communities and 'collective endeavour' that John Yandell worries are so under threat can be built. Furthermore, there is evidence that the 'teach and learn not manage and perform' approach that the college has embraced works. Investors in People have recognised the achievements of the college with 'Champion' status, which is awarded nationally to very few organisations. Leyton's latest Ofsted inspection report (June 2016) assessed the college as 'good' in all areas, and commended it for 'an excellent culture and ethos, strongly focused on developing the craft of teaching and supporting learners to succeed'. Retention of staff is strong, student numbers are extremely healthy and exam results are rising in many areas of the college.

References

Viviane Robinson (2011) *Student Centred Leadership*. Josey Bass

John Yandell (20/06/16) 'The Government's vision for education is a deeply troubling one'. *The Daily Telegraph*.