Keeping teaching and learning up front and centre: Thinking points on our afternoon keynote address

Author: Jo Fletcher-Saxon: jo.fletcher-saxon@asfc.ac.uk / @JFletcherSaxon

Bio: Jo Fletcher-Saxon is an Assistant Principal at Ashton Sixth Form College, managing adult and higher education including education undergraduate programmes and primary, secondary and FE teacher training. Jo leads on teaching, learning and scholarly activity within post-19 provision, leads the college's NQT programme, and she also has responsibility for one of the college's large vocational departments for 16-19 year olds. Jo is the practitioner research lead at the college and a convenor for the Learning and Skills Research Network, Greater Manchester region.

Introduction

Together with colleague and fellow assistant principal Brian Copper, I was invited to speak at #ReimagineFE18 about the challenges we face in making teaching and learning the first priority in our roles, our organisation, and in our own classroom practice. In order to respond to the brief, we ended up breaking apart and deconstructing many of the activities across college to allow us to then pull together our talk. We looked back at Coffield's article "Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority," (2008) and sought to test our thinking against his work. We asked if we were really living up to our own claims of prioritising teaching and learning.

This article provides a summary of our thinking about how we seek to prioritise teaching and learning. We begin by explaining how we are situated within the context of our workplace. We work as Assistant Principals in a Sixth Form College that recruits 2000+ 16-19 year olds and around 500+ adult and HE students each year. As Assistant Principals, we are senior managers fulfilling a leadership role working with middle managers and teams, while still teaching within our own subjects. This gives us a particular lens through which we were able to respond to the brief and through which we both lead and view the day-to-day business of teaching and learning at the college. Having pulled apart and identified all the places

and spaces within which we felt teaching and learning was prioritised, we then sought to reflect these and came up with a number of strands to encapsulate our thinking.

Professional development

What do colleges define as Continuous Professional Development (CPD)? Do colleges make a distinction between top down compliance training, which addresses institutional policies and procedures, and professional development, which is enriching and focussed on the core challenges of teaching and learning? Staff professional development is a key driver of improvements and ongoing developments in teaching and learning for us as a college and as individuals. The challenge here is to get the balance right in terms of training and professional development and not to confuse the two. It became clear on the day of the conference that within some institutions the lines between these two can be very blurred, and the balance may not be right. If teaching and learning is truly the first priority then this will be evident in several ways including: the proportion of organisational budget and spending on professional development; the importance attached to not just the organisational led days drawing out particular teaching and learning themes but also the opportunities and activities for staff throughout the year; and in the part staff play in both shaping and delivering professional development. Good professional development is part of a package of actions a college will take to assure and enable excellent teaching and learning and, as Rushton (2014) reminds us, inspired teachers make for inspired students. It was a great opportunity to be part of the working group on practitioner research at the conference, a strand of professional development within colleges that is often not afforded the space it deserves but is an area we are currently investing in as a college.

Data and teaching and learning mechanics

We are awash with data. Producing it, looking at it, receiving it. In-house student performance data should be and can be our friend. What is needed is sensible strategic decision-making about its use and a full understanding of what it is telling us. If we cannot make use of it, why are we producing it? A common criticism voiced in social media spaces is that college institutions are too data driven. Colleges are getting the balance right if they do not lose sight of the fact that data and those

statistics are students. They are not two entities; the data is the people. As our college Deputy Principal will remind us all, the data and the statistics are actually hundreds of stories rolled up into what we see within those reports.

Every college will have a means of monitoring teaching and learning activity, managing data, collecting information about student progress, carrying out assessment, responding to that flow of student information, and seeking feedback from all stakeholders about teaching and learning experiences. If we are keeping teaching and learning as the first priority, then it is vital that these "mechanics" or mechanisms do not become the end point. All college systems must be there to underpin and support learning. When staff spend more time on writing a report for managers than they do in the preparation and delivery of lessons and carrying out assessment that enables learners, then we are getting it wrong; we have lost our way. With all new processes and initiatives, the teaching and learning focus will remain prominent if questions are asked that seek to test out their true teaching and learning value, the value they might bring to our core objective of teaching and learning and student progress (and then we can think about value for money).

Digital diligence

Many teachers, tutors, lecturers and learning support staff in the sector have embraced the teaching and learning opportunities afforded by digital innovation. It remains vital, however, that students and staff are proactively supported in developing their digital skills as both learners and leaders of learning. Digital skills are now enshrined in the new Ofsted CIF (Common Inspection Framework); if any provider needed a further push to develop the use of digital technology, then this will provide it. But for most colleges and other provider types, we are seeking to make best use of technology in ways that truly support all of us – as teachers and as learners. Avoiding fads and whims is a must, as is encouraging anyone who may resist developments to embrace new technology. All of this becomes possible when digital pedagogy is seen as a core part of teaching and learning with staff and students enabled to make use of fit for purpose digital platforms and technology. They should not be at the mercy of institutional policy dressed up as teaching and learning but really about cost saving.

The voices

At a bare minimum, all colleges and learning providers will seek the views of stakeholders on an annual basis, and they may well be very self-congratulatory about high percentage satisfaction rates. But we need a reality check; we need to be honest and transparent. How well are the views of learners (or other stakeholders) truly represented or considered at the heart of teaching and learning decisions? Are students attending middle and senior level meetings – in subjects or cross college or becoming part of teaching and learning strategy groups? We can survey our learners in an endless cycle, but the real power dynamics start to shift when we all sit around a table together and thrash out what works, what's challenging and what changes and developments we should pursue. At the same time, we must also be mindful of who might know best, as Kirschner asks "Do learners really know best?" (2013). For example, Shibli (2018) reflects on Kirschner's paper when thinking through use of practical work in class. Shibli realised that while students will tell us how much they enjoy and prefer practical work, learning may not be effective if this comes too soon, before theory or concepts are understood. So whilst student voices should be truly heard, we must also retain professional judgement in our responses and decision making around teaching and learning.

The journey is not always smooth

Another challenge faced when we are prioritising teaching and learning is how we react when things go wrong, how we handle those difficult conversations and how we respond with interventions or other decisions. In situations where the teaching and learning experience for students is poor, a swift response is required in order to try and quickly improve the experience for students. We must respond to ensure students are supported, but we must also respond so that the member of staff is treated with dignity, is afforded space and time to resolve the problems or a decision reached by both parties about that teaching role. This is one of the most difficult places to be as a senior leader and if we do not find it difficult, this may well be an indicator that we are losing our sense of humanity. As Crawley (2018) reminds us when explaining 'people centred teaching' and 'acts of connection', education is and should be centred on people. Crawley (2018:11) reminds us of John Dewey's argument, that "learning is not just about outcomes or bodies of knowledge but that it

is focussed on the lifelong growth of the learner as a person with feelings, interests, needs and preoccupations". I would also contend that being "people centred" also extends to how we support and work with teachers—and with each other—when resolving difficult situations.

Pastoral care

Moving away from the notion of pastoral care as "tea and sympathy" has reaped positive rewards for colleges and their learners. The previous approach created a situation in which curriculum and pastoral staff were pitted against each other in a battle of retention and withdrawal. Pastoral staff sharing accountability for student outcomes keeps a focus on teaching and learning success. In this model, staff in pastoral roles are as focussed on student success as curriculum staff. This shapes the pastoral programme and also informs the target setting approach for those staff and their annual reviews and appraisals. Our Assistant Principal for Student Services talks about 'fostering a collegiate approach' to student success. Here he is including not just those in pastoral roles, but all staff across the organisation having a part to play in student success, with a strong emphasis on behaviour for learning. This is as much an issue in the corridors and on the grounds as it is in the classroom, requiring a consistent approach from all staff.

Pastoral staff are key to removing or tackling many barriers that students may present, but so are subject teachers.

Undoubtedly, a very current pressure for education settings is an increase in mental ill health amongst some students and the parallel decrease in access to support services for learners suffering in this way. Colleges will continue to provide all of the services that they reasonably can offer while continuing to campaign for improved mental health support in post-16 provision. Colleges have, as always, responded with innovation and care to the decreased availability of vital services, whether through offering anxiety workshops or funding additional hours with the college counsellor, but it is another service about which a difficult strategic decision must be made when allocating scarce financial resources.

Keeping it real with compliance

Without a doubt, colleges are beholden to many masters and meeting their demands is a tireless quest. But, if pleasing our masters becomes a bigger focus for us than

the priority of teaching and learning, then again, we have lost our way. Inspection regimes are there for a reason; we are and must remain accountable to the public purse. However, as public servants we are accountable first to our students and our local communities. Within our quality cycles we have quality assurance activities (learning walks, observations and reviews) that allow us to provide those checks and balances and to respond when things need to change. We also have quality improvement cycles (peer observation, sharing and celebrating good practice and innovation, mentors, advanced practitioners, professional development activity) through which we drive forward on developments. We must endeavour to keep balance here too and not let the demands for compliance crush innovation and make us risk averse, thus prohibiting innovation in the classroom and within our teaching and learning practice. We must be brave.

Decisions through a Teaching and Learning 'lens'

Whether it's how much to spend on computers, the timing for a new build or a corridor repaint, the choice of exam board, class sizes, remission (note that all leaders teach at our college), health and wellbeing resources, staff training and development, creating a new timetable, changing institutional types, quality assurance planning or reporting mechanisms, we have found the use of a teaching and lens to be a powerful tool for understanding potential impact. This is not to say that a financial lens or a wellbeing lens may not carry more weight at times, but if we make it our starting point, we ensure teaching and learning (and therefore student success) is prioritised.

Looking forward

In the end, it should not be empty rhetoric to keep teaching and learning at the forefront and learners at the centre. It's our area of expertise; it's why we chose to teach in further education. I conclude with a summary of points from our talk that we believe are desirable behaviours for institutions who make teaching and learning their first priority:

1. Learning organisations must invest in professional development opportunities that are both priority led and individually driven. Training for policy compliance is of course necessary, but this must not be confused with professional development.

2. Management of data reporting about student progress is handled, distributed and accessed in ways that inform teachers and support learning.

3. Learning organisations invest in and support digital pedagogy for students and staff and this contributes to student success.

4. Learner voice is more than replies to surveys. Students should be involved in all layers of an organisation—particularly in those spaces where decision making powers sit—with an ability to help shape those decisions.

5. Successful colleges are 'people centred'. Innovation in teaching and learning is positively encouraged and students are successful and thrive.

6. Compliance demands must not crush innovation. New approaches to teaching and learning are encouraged, shared and celebrated.

7. Strategic decisions within an institution are always viewed through a teaching and learning 'lens'.

It was an honour for Brian and I to present at ReimagineFE18 and talk about our bread and butter work. It was an inspiration to hear Frank Coffield and to rise to his challenge regarding the impact senior leaders may or may not have. It was also a privilege to hear Ali Hadawi share sector challenges from the perspective of a principal. Sharing our thinking with so many other further education colleagues was also insightful; it was a revelation to discover different ways of thinking across the sector and how much there is to be gained from professional development that allows us to meet with others to inform our work. The professional dialogues were an important learning curve for us. True to our word, we kept learning at the forefront – for ourselves on this occasion.

Reference list

Coffield, F (2008) *Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority*. London: LSN.

Crawley, J (2018) *Just teach in FE: A people – centred approach*. London: SAGE.

Dewey, J, (1916) *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education*. New York: Macmillan.

Kirschner, P. (2013), 'Do learners really know best? Urban legends in education,' *Educational Psychologist,* 48(3):169-183.

Shibli, D. (2018) 'Reflecting on Kirschner: Do learners really know best? Urban legends in education,' *Impact: Journal of the Chartered College of Teacher*s [online]. Available from: https://impact.chartered.college/article/shibli-kirschner-learners-know-best-urban-legends/ (accessed 02/09/18).

Rushton, P. (2014) *Leading to outstanding teaching and learning*. Market Harborough, Leicestershire: AMiE.