

# Is it possible to create the perfect recipe for positive educational change?

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# **Is it possible to create the perfect recipe for positive educational change?**

## **Abstract**

This is an exploration into the barriers faced by practitioners and managers seeking to introduce improvements to teaching, learning and assessment within the adult education sector. I will be searching for the ingredients that make up good or outstanding educational opportunities and attempting to transfer any good practice identified. My involvement in the LSIS funded RDF/ RDA project in partnership with SUNSET amply demonstrated that there is no lack of views on this topic. It was a pleasure and an inspiring experience to hear the views of practitioners and managers from 20 different institutions from across the sector, not to mention the input from influential commentators on adult education such as Frank Coffield and others.

The initial research aim was to engage two practitioner colleagues Diane Holmes/Jude Mackenzie with a view to exploring an area of their practice that was identified by an Ofsted report Skills for Employment 2012. This proposal was accepted by LSIS as having value and in addition, I was asked to do some research to run alongside this research, but from a management perspective looking into the challenges of transferring the lessons learnt from this initial research proposal.

## **Introduction**

The identification of “good practice” and its transference is of value to all institutions, and for those funded through Government departments like the Department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) and inspected by Ofsted it is a necessity.

Educational researchers and influential commentators argue that the notion of ‘good practice’ is a goal undefined, and can only be understood in terms of context and

development. After all if good practice was a known quantity, surely it would be simply replicated and no further development would be necessary

*“Where teachers were engaged in these kinds of activities they tended to raise challenges to suggestions of good practice being considered universally applicable.”* Fielding pp32 (2005)

I began my investigation by asking why this research question was necessary in the first place, as on the face of it, it would appear that educationalists and students already know what good education looks and feels like. After all it is not a new concept, education has been with us for well over 2000 years and our civilisation and culture is built on the accumulated knowledge of scholars and independent thinkers. I concluded that asking: Is it possible to create the perfect recipe for positive educational change? was worth pursuing because from my own point of view, as an educational manager I find myself continually trying to identify good practice and attempting to transfer this practice across the provision I am responsible for.

### **The intention of the research**

If I am able to improve the transfer of measurable good practice by identifying the barriers people at all levels of my institution encounter and make some recommendations on how to remove as many of them as possible other colleagues will have an opportunity to test them and hopefully contribute to further solutions.

### **Initial findings**

There is no shortage of measurable good practice within the WEA. This can be demonstrated through statistical evidence such as observation of teaching and learning (OTL) grade profile, MIS data on success rates and published case studies, YouTube clips of tutors and students describing their experience. (See WEA website <http://www.wea.org.uk/> and links for further information). I also found a strong

commitment from people working and volunteering at all levels of the organisation to provide the best possible learning experience for all its students. I also found that this good or outstanding practice remains for the most part, in pockets within regions and across the association as a whole.

I found a number of reasons for this, which I describe as external forces acting on the institution and internal forces (the response of the institution to the external forces) which act on individuals at different levels of the institution. I go on to explain some of these forces, their origins and their impact later.

In an attempt to summarise these forces and their impact I am reminded of a humorous scene from a Monty Python film "The Meaning of Life" (1983)

*"What was that about hats again?"* - perhaps slightly out of place in what is meant to be a serious discussion on developing and transferring a quality educational experience. (See appendix 1 for full quote and a link to the clip.) My interpretation of this scene is that most people, most of the time, seek to do a good job and to the best of their ability. Unfortunately they are distracted from doing so because of all the day-to-day problems, new initiatives, funding changes, deadlines and general life constraints.

Some of the forces acting on individuals are, 'I think' apparent to most people working in the education and skills sector, so I mention them briefly: funding, the allocation of resources including human resource, time, capacity, contract management including audit and inspection, all of which can be said to be Leadership & Management responsibilities. While I am sure these factors are worthy of further research, the time constraints and size of this research project prevents me from exploring them directly. I refer to these forces as 'surface forces' but beneath

these forces lie a set of sub-forces that impact on the ability of individuals and thus the institution, to systematically transfer existing good practice.

### **Some limitations to my research**

In essence I am attempting to find the holy-grail of educational managers; the perfect recipe for positive educational change and then seeking to transfer this to all the provision I am responsible for. If such a recipe exists, along with the method of transferring it, I would be astonished if I found it, not to mention my humble career would assume the dizzy heights of management 'Guru' status. I don't think this is going to happen.

A more realistic goal I feel able to shed light on is the extent to which internal forces impact on the ability to transfer developing and insightful practice. Given the complexity of the adult skills sector my contribution can only be from the perspective of my own institution, the WEA. At this point there are two points I wish to recognise and offer the reader to criticise.

- a) Clearly I am an employee of the WEA and as such I am bound by my contract of employment not to openly or publish any detrimental comments about my employer. I recognise that this could impact on my research. However it is not the intention of this research to criticise any particular organisation but to explore the factors preventing the transference of good practice in teaching, learning and assessment.
- b) I am aware of the ethical considerations of my research. It has been suggested that I anonymise my institution. I fully take this on board but I find that my research would be compromised if I did not mention the context in which it has been derived. Given that the WEA is the single largest voluntary provider of education in England; in my view it would be a matter of contrived

innocence on my part to assume that once mentioning this, the name of my institution would not be known.

## **Literature Review Part 1 External & Internal Forces**

Interestingly I found a plethora of literature that articulated a great deal of external forces acting on educational organisations and not it seems all for the better. Much of this literature is of a political nature and does not reflect the improvement of an educational experience, but provides examples of a power struggle between; on the one hand educationalists seeking to deliver courses that meet the needs and wishes of students as they see them, and the power of the state that funds such provision to ensure that education delivers economic and social outcomes best suited to the political climate of the time. The literature review does not attempt to identify if state funded education is or is not subject to political influence as it is self-evident that it is. My logic being if a political party or the government of the day publishes a manifesto, education policy or funding intentions, it is by its very nature, designed to have influence on education. This research is in part about identifying barriers and the extent to which these barriers prevent good practice from flourishing.

One of the barriers I found was a culture of blame or acceptance of restrictive structures. "What can we do about it; 'they' set our targets which we have to meet". One has to ask, if it is not the deliberate intention of the institution to disenfranchise its staff, how and why do people become to believe they are unable to change an unsatisfactory situation? One possible answer could be that the power of the state is not just influential but also very pervasive, not least because it has always been part of the environment and like wallpaper almost goes unnoticed or unchallenged except by a few influential educational researchers.

## **Is state sponsored education about securing social and economic outcomes best suited to the political climate of the day?**

The state has sought to control what teachers should be teaching since it was discovered that education could be used to create the kind of society the rich and powerful felt was in the best interests of students & pupils. One early example shows the introduction of socially divided education based on class:

*first-grade schools* with a leaving age of 18 or 19 would provide a 'liberal education' - including Latin and Greek - to prepare upper and upper-middle class boys for the universities and the older professions;

*second-grade schools* with a leaving age of 16 or 17 would teach two modern languages besides Latin to prepare middle class boys for the army, the newer professions and departments of the Civil Service; and

*third-grade schools* with a leaving age of 14 or 15 would teach the elements of French and Latin to lower middle class boys, who would be expected to become 'small tenant farmers, small tradesmen, and superior artisans'. (The Commissioners treated these schools as secondary schools because the Elementary School Code of 1860 had fixed the leaving age for elementary schools at 12).

Gillard D (2011) Education in England: a brief history

[www.educationengland.org.uk/history](http://www.educationengland.org.uk/history)

Successive governments have created institutions, QUANGOS, and departments with the sole aim of producing education that best fits the political climate of the time one example would be the creation of the Manpower Services Commission which came out of the 1973 Employment & Training Act

*“building a workforce better adapted to the needs of the 1980s, was too important to be left to the vagaries of the labour market and the streets, or in*

*the hands of an unreformed and now suspect educational apparatus.” MSC*

Holland Report (1977) in Esland. G (1990)

Of course that was all a long time ago but apart from some of the language not much has changed and such forces are still very much with us.

Coffield F. explores the impact of such forces in more detail in his pamphlet “Just suppose teaching and learning became the first priority” (2008)

*“The learners must not demand too much (funding for ESOL courses was restricted in 2007 because too many immigrants and asylum seekers enrolled for them). Nor must they demand the ‘wrong’ type of course (skills for ‘employability’ take precedence over learning for personal development; and funding will only be forthcoming for those vocational qualifications approved by Sector Skills Councils).” Coffield. F (2008)*

Today we have the department for Business Innovation and Skills (BIS) the Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and Ofsted to ensure educational provision serves our political masters.

Some government publications counter the assertion that education is controlled directly by Government or its various arms collectively called “the machinery of government”

*“The legislative changes introduced through the Education Act 2011 mean that the only powers the Chief Executive of Skills Funding possesses to effect change in provider behaviour are: the power to fund post-19 provision, and the power to impose conditions of funding to seek*



*assurance that public money and learners' interests are being protected".*

Provider Risk Assessment and Management July 2012 Skills Funding Agency

So long as providers can fund their own provision it seems that they can decide what courses they can offer and who to.

### **Context, challenge, solution, practice transfer and impact**

This research is not unique in that I am researching education but there are some distinctive characteristics about the context in which it was undertaken. The Workers' Educational Association founded in 1903, is a charity and the UK's largest voluntary sector provider of adult education, delivering 9,500 part-time courses for over 74,000 people each year in England and Scotland. It is also a lead campaigning organisation with a strong sense of social purpose.

Like all institutions the WEA must continually develop and improve not just to keep ahead of funding and inspection regimes but also to remain relevant to the changing social and economic environment in which it operates. It has recently refreshed its mission, vision and values and replaced curriculum areas with four educational themes: health & wellbeing, community involvement, employability and culture. This, along with bringing education for a social purpose into all its provision, represents a considerable amount of change and challenge to its 2000 part time tutors and 3000 volunteers. It is not envisaged that these changes will happen overnight, not least because of the dispersed nature of the organisation and its provision, however one needs to start somewhere or several places at once. One of the most important if not the most important place to start is the practice of its tutorial staff as they will have the largest impact on the speed of change.

With resources as finite as they are it makes sense to utilise the existing practice that reflects the needs, mission and values of the organisation. Of course one needs to be sure that such practice is based on evidence and research.

This LISIS funded project in partnership with SUNSET has provided some measurable impact measures that enables the recognition of practitioner value in developing and driving forward the strategic aims of the institution. Alongside my research project, two practitioners colleagues Diane Holmes/Jude Mackenzie were given the opportunity to research an area of their practice that has strategic value to the organisation: provision designed to enhance the employment opportunities of its students. Pockets of well researched and developing practice are extremely valuable as it provides a practice model that can be transferred.

### **Practice transfer/Joint Practice Development (JPD)**

#### **Literature review Part 2 Fielding & others**

There are many reasons why innovative, creative, motivational and inspirational courses appear to spring up almost seemingly from nowhere. Of course they don't as behind these courses there is an equally creative, motivated and inspirational tutor supported by an equally enthusiastic member of staff. Unfortunately this dynamic set of circumstances is not part of a systematic process of developing and transferring practice.

As eluded to earlier it is tempting to simply publish research reports, lesson plans, learning outcomes and teaching resources etc. (off the shelf courses) with a view to embedding these courses into the practice of tutors working across different subjects, context and locations. This approach has had some success within the WEA most noticeably within Trade Union studies. However this provision has the advantage of being developed over many years and the TUC partners have an

expectation that the tutors teaching this provision have a union background.

Although not formally recognised this has led to a form of community of practice.

The challenge facing the WEA is not the production of quality teaching resources, smart learning outcomes or even interactive assessment methods but the embedding of a concept (education for a social purpose) into the practice of many practitioners and not only this but also a method of measuring its impact. This will require individual practitioners to reflect on their existing practice and make changes as required. As Jude and Diane discovered during their research, better results are to be gained through engaging colleagues as equals to jointly develop practice together.

*“This method ensures that all participants are actively involved in the process and most of the decisions, researching with the participants rather than on them”.* Diane Holmes/Jude Mackenzie

## **Research Methodology**

I used an action research approach using collaborative inquiry - the evidence I gathered used the principle of obtaining views from three different perspectives: Educational Managers, Course Organisers (who directly line manage a cohort of tutors) and tutors themselves. The methods I used were focused discussions, a questionnaire and analysis of MIS data: Observation of Teaching and Learning (OTL) grade profiles, achievement, success and attendance data. I also researched WEA data on publicity and strategic aims. The most important element of my research approach was that of building trust among the participants. As it turned out this trust building was to be a greater challenge than I had envisaged for the reasons given below.

As with life, so it is with research; one cannot rule out the impact of serendipity. During the short time of this research project the North East region (my region) underwent a re-structure which not only had a significant impact on my personal role within the organisation but also on the colleagues who were to participate in the research.

In order to remain focused on the aims of my research I will not discuss the nature or the reasons for the re-structure but its impact on the methods chosen. An unforeseen effect of the timing and implications of this re-structure served to provide additional real-time data on the forces acting on institutions and the implications of these forces on individuals.

It has been well documented that changes in the workplace such as re-structures have unintended consequences for the individuals directly involved and those not directly involved. One example from ACAS describes increased levels of stress, feelings of insecurity. It is not surprising that staff worried about their own livelihoods, may mistrust a researcher attempting to find out the types of activities they do on a day-to-day basis and the barriers they encounter in identifying and transferring good practice. If you then add to this the fact that the researcher has just been appointed as the new line manager you can imagine I had some convincing to do to elicit data that accurately reflected the barriers and opportunities, as opposed to the perceived right answers that would ensure the maintenance of their current job role.

### **Re-focusing my methods and some initial findings**

I began with the analysis of WEA, MIS data and published publicity case study articles. I used quantifiable data demonstrating the value and quality of the learning experiences of students, of which there were many. I asked staff (Course Organisers) and then separately tutors in free discussion, who was responsible for

this? This simple approach and question hit such a rich seam of data I could hardly keep pace with the responses. Course Organisers described how they (almost like a talent scout) identify tutors that have a passion for what they do and support them in developing this passion into courses and creative activities for students. Tutors described how they draw inspiration from their students and their enthusiasm to learn more about the subject they teach. Both groups, rightly in my view, laid claim to producing inspirational and challenging courses that make a positive change in the lives of students. This was the highpoint in the discussion; I then went on to demonstrate that the published case studies of students life changing experiences were drawn from the WEA national website and represented a small proportion of the 74,000 people who enrol on our courses each year.

In an attempt to discover why the previous high point of discussions which delivered such a rich seam of examples of inspirational educational opportunities, had not led to wide spread transference of this practice, I simply asked Why? Once again I was deluged with responses. The responses were, what I have called sub-forces that are not directly linked to barriers such as: funding, contract management, audit or inspection but reflected a perception that these forces rule what they are allowed to do. Tutors described how they are contracted to deliver particular courses within a highly structured environment. Asking about this environment replies such as “it’s the system, you have to do all the paperwork”, “As a tutor I can’t just decide to do what the students want, I have to make sure I cover all the basics whether they like it or not”. Some examples given were: proving the students are learning through individual learning plans, assessment plans, and proving I am teaching through tutor course reports, evaluation forms, tracking sheets etc. Course Organisers also had similar concerns about being seen to be doing a good job, meeting targets and maintaining financially viable courses that could demonstrate quality to external agencies.

It was about this time I made a grave error of judgement in my attempt to obtain qualitative data on the activities of Course Organisers. It was my intention to collect data on their day-to-day activities and analyse the extent to which their time was taken up with administrative activities and those of supporting and developing inspiring educational opportunities. I produced what I thought was a reasonable questionnaire on their activities and the time they spent on each (see appendix 2). It very soon became apparent to me that I had transgressed their trust. While they were happy to discuss their activities in open discussion it was a very different matter from putting them down on paper. On noticing this; I said “this is just my own ham-fisted way of collecting data” and quickly consigned my questionnaire to the bin in the hope I would retain their trust. This mistake did offer an example of how and why staff can quickly lose trust. From my perspective, they had nothing to worry about but clearly my perspective was not the issue. I attempted to find out why staff that had worked for the organisation for many years would feel threatened by completing a questionnaire. I found that discussing this in a one to one situation as equals worked better than group discussions. I found that it was not me or the questionnaire they mistrusted but the use the data may be put to. The reason why they had come to think this was due to the constant pace of change and the feelings of insecurity this creates.

## **Research Findings**

Is it possible to create the perfect recipe for positive educational change?

Well yes it is; and it is actually not that difficult. All you need is a passionate tutor with the ability to impart their knowledge to a group of people with an enquiring mind; something we have been doing since the dawn of our civilisation. Why then do we

not simply transfer this product around the world? The answer is somewhat more complicated. From the evidence of the literature review and my own enquires education has become a product funded for the most part by our Government. It can also be a form of social control. In a society predicated on economic advancement, education is successful when it contributes to this economic success.

So then does the simple equation of: the acquisition of skills leading to employment equal a perfect recipe for positive educational change? Some may agree others may not. Much will depend on the political views one has and whether or not you believe that taxpayers should be funding education that does not lead to a more prosperous nation. Of course the social fabric of our nation is also dependant on the quality of our educational system.

There is no shortage of publications on what good teaching, learning and assessment is; we even have a common inspection framework (Ofsted) that purports to measure and grade it along with the effectiveness of the institution delivering it. This does beg the question of who are making the decisions about what is in the best interests of students? And why?

*"The only thing that interferes with my learning is my education."* Einstein. A  
(1879-1955)

If students wish to make a change in their lives should we not be listening to what they need and work with them to develop provision that fulfils this need? The findings of this small scale piece of research suggests that the people who are best placed to do this (those closest to students) are furthest from the decision making process and often find themselves engaged in compliance activities developed by remote systems that seek to demonstrate learning has taken place. Where we do find inspirational and life changing learning experiences we also find an inspirational

tutor supported by a member of staff who has removed as many of the barriers imposed by the perceptions of what others insist, what good education looks like.

The barriers that hinder the development of good educational experiences are disguised by constant government interference. While constant change in funding, including cuts and the ever demanding reporting requirements, take resources away from investing in new and insightful educational opportunities they do not remove good practice. What removes good practice is a set of fears and misunderstandings at different levels of organisations. The first misunderstanding is around what good practice is. Good practice can and often is defined by data: OTL grade profiles, success rates, good and compliant practitioner documentation etc. When practice is defined by these methods alone or even primarily it sets up a sub-force of fear or concern that other provision is therefore not good and needs managing until it is. This in turn creates a culture of risk aversion which can drive out creativity replacing it with creative compliance where all the right boxes are ticked. This takes up a lot of energy, can remove the autonomy of tutors to make decisions with their students and it also impacts on motivation. This can have the effect of driving out good practice because once having achieved the status of 'good practice' one simply needs to repeat it over and over again. As one practitioner and OTL observer put it "you can tell the difference between a tutor that has 20 years' experience made up of 1 year repeated 20 times and a tutor with 2 years' experience but made up of continuous reflection and development. If we are able to make the decision that the only good practice is developing practice then our efforts to measure and capture it will have the effect of recognising and encouraging innovation and development.

When it comes to transferring good educational experience we find the same forces at work. A belief that transferring practice means the development of a set of resources others can use: lesson plans, schemes of work, assessment methods,



SMART learning outcomes and so on. What appears to be true is that the transference of the actual tutor practice and the context it was developed within is less simple to transfer but without which has a significant impact on the use of the resources and the outcomes. These forces tend to conspire to keep inspirational educational experiences confined to pockets within institutions. There did not appear to be any resistance on the part of managers for tutors themselves transferring their practice among each other as professionals. The barriers were mostly logistical and financial. Sessional part time tutors work across large geographical areas and bringing them together to develop their practice was seen as both costly and time consuming. Also tutors themselves had some reservations about as they perceived it “teaching other tutors”. Tutors themselves needed to think about CPD in a different way; it was assumed by some tutors that they were being asked to deliver a training package on behalf of the WEA. The notion of joint practice development where professionals get together to discuss and share the challenges and even mistakes and how they overcame them needed to be understood first. There also needed to be a process of trust building so that tutors felt that they were not being judged by others.

## **Recommendations**

This has been a small scale study using a humanistic approach of developing collaboration and open discussion among the participants to reveal the barriers they face in developing and transferring their best practice. Further research is required to collect more quantitative data and the likely impact of the recommendations.

## **For managers**

There is little doubt that we work in a very complex environment with many different competing forces such as funding, targets, contract compliance, quality and

inspection. We are also responsible for the management of and their effective working relationships. With all these competing forces on our time and thought processes there is a danger of managing what we see as the most pressing issue of the day. These issues tend to be overtly measurable outcomes such as MIS data like success rates, OTL grade profiles, KPI's and finance; which are all of course extremely important. The danger is that we overlook the culture these forces generate among ourselves and the staff we manage. The most corrosive culture that can be generated is that of learnt helplessness or disenfranchisement in the face of such powerful forces which are for the most part imposed upon us by external agencies.

The culture of helplessness happens almost invisibly in an insidious way as people become to think that they are doing a good job when they can prove they are achieving that which can be measured by our data. An unintended consequence of this is the temptation to invent even more forms and checklists to demonstrate our good and effective practice. When good practice is defined by forms and data alone it can lead to creative compliance or simply good form filling and checklist completion. Developing or maintaining a culture of innovation and development requires trust and some risk taking but the rewards are well worth the effort.

If we accept that students need time to learn, then as managers, should we not set aside some dedicated time to reflect on how we encourage staff and tutors to feel empowered and trusted to innovate and develop new ideas, courses and subjects.

### **For Course Organising staff**

A recurring theme of this research was the time constraints and pressures acting on people at all levels of the organisation and sadly this is not likely to diminish. If we ask ourselves what makes us productive and what impact do we have on the

learning experience we begin to see where we should be encouraged to allocate some of our precious time. Maintaining our motivation and the feeling we are making a positive change in the lives of our students go hand-in-hand, but assuming we are powerless in the face of external forces removes our ability to make independent decisions and suggest new ideas or ways of working. Recognising one's own professional practice and the impact we have on the lives of others is not something that comes naturally to all of us but doing this is the first step in recognising and valuing it in others. Making a positive and lasting change in a student's life through learning is the most important thing we do and is highly prized by the organisation and student alike. How we do this is not always measurable in quantitative terms and there is a temptation to simply think this is what we do as part of my job. Taking the time to analyse how we do this and producing some evidence will help to influence internal forces and the allocation of resources.

### **For Tutors**

Working for a distinctive organisation like the WEA has many advantages and the tutors I spoke to during this research said how they appreciated the independence they have in designing their courses and allowing students to have an input to the content and methods chosen. The other side of this is that they also felt isolated and did not often meet other tutors. Apart from the occasional OTL and what students say they had little chance to exchange ideas or learn from other tutors delivering similar topics. Tutors too felt that their practice was measured by the way they completed forms and other paperwork. Tutors hold the key to make the biggest impact on changes and developments the organisation seeks to make, yet they do not make this connection in their day to day activities. Again forces outside their control seem to drive what they do and how they do it.

From what I have gathered tutors seeking to come together and share their practice would be pushing at an open door. What is required to make this happen it seems is an honest broker to set things in motion and create a structure. Getting tutors together to share their practice is to be commended but for it to be sustainable and valued there needs to be more than friendly discussion. A systematic and planned process to create a community of practice around a set of things tutors feel passionate about and which is also supportive and developmental would be required.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

Taking time to create and maintain a culture of “we can” despite the external forces acting on people at all levels of the organisation will do much to create the environment for innovation and development we need.

**What was that about hats again?**

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<http://rescomp.stanford.edu/~cheshire/EinsteinQuotes.html> Quote from Einstein

## Appendix 1

Monty Python film "The Meaning of Life" (1983)

"What was that about hats again?"

YouTube clip [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2QJvc\\_SxFQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2QJvc_SxFQ)

Text: The Meaning of Life (1983)

Yeah, I've had a team working on this over the past few weeks, and what we've come up with can be reduced to two fundamental concepts. One: People aren't wearing enough hats. Two: Matter is energy. In the universe there are many energy fields which we cannot normally perceive. Some energies have a spiritual source which act upon a person's soul. However, this "soul" does not exist ab initio as orthodox Christianity teaches; it has to be brought into existence by a process of guided self-observation. However, this is rarely achieved owing to man's unique ability to be distracted from spiritual matters by everyday trivia.

Certainly. Hat sales have increased but not *pari passu*, as our research...

