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Review of Further education, government’s discourse policy and practice: killing a paradigm softly.

Terry Hyland

University of Bolton, t.hyland@bolton.ac.uk

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This analysis of government policy and discourse on further education (FE) is similar to many other recent policy studies, in that it tries to make sense of the background to the incorporation of colleges in 1993 and the aftermath in terms of developments in funding, management, learning, teaching and general mission. It is, however, different and unique in at least two main ways: first, it investigates the sector by drawing parallels between the 1944 settlement on education and recent trends in FE and, secondly, it foregrounds policy discourse and ‘the power which governmental discourse can have in determining action’ (p.x).

These formal (methodological) and contextual characteristics are pursued systematically throughout the study of FE from 1944 to 1997, guided by the key research question of ‘why educational goals are changing and who has power to do the changing’ (p.15) and supplemented by case studies of four different types of college. The importance of linguistic/discourse analysis in understanding the links between policy and its implementation is brought out (Chap 5) through the exploration of key metaphors and themes – vision, inadequacy, rationalisation, marketisation and compromise – and examined within the framework of government policy statements on the sector throughout the period investigated. In addition to this qualitative work, a quantitative analysis (Chap 6) of government documents based on word frequency is employed to uncover ‘language coding themes’ which bring out the emergence of commercial/market/consumer as against caring/equality/service emphases (and these codes are later used in researching the four colleges).

Metaphors and themes effectively highlight both the continuities and changes in FE policy and practice over the last half century. The vision of FE in 1944 included a wide definition of a college’s role in relation to its local community and society generally, as well as a wide interpretation of education, inclusive of the development of each individual’s character and capacities and of academic as well as recreational abilities. The
role of the college was perceived as one with a close relationship with the community, particularly its youth and their needs (p.107).

All this is a long way from the 1990s obsession with input/output accountability, quality control and value for money. As Cripps puts it, the theme of equality which characterised the 1940s vision was replaced by that of quality, underpinned by a reductionist form of utilitarianism which marginalised everything but the economic motive for FE provision. Reflected in marketised language, technicist managerialism and economic rationalisation, all of this represented ‘a paradigm shift in governmental discourse during this period from educational effectiveness to institutional efficiency’ (p.149).

However, as the more detailed word frequency analysis revealed, although the importation of market values into FE in the 1990s was new in educational speak, the commercial coding was not, since the role of the sector as the ‘handmaiden of employment’ (p.108) was dominant in the 1940s as serving the needs of local employers tended to stifle the development of broader educational aims. There thus remains a tension – in government policy and institutional practices at all levels – between the ‘market’ and ‘caring’ codes used to support FE learning. According to Cripps, these two language themes serve to ‘explain how social policy rhetoric can both espouse equal opportunity and consistently fail to bring about the changes in social relations needed to achieve it’ (p.263). This would apply just as well to the avowed espousal of both economic efficiency and social inclusion in more recent lifelong learning policy, with the economistic/technicist aims always taking pride of place over the social/democratic ones.

The key thesis of this study is that ‘language is an important tool of policy change’ (p.262) and Cripps has fully justified this claim with her analysis of FE developments from the 1940s to the 1990s. A subsidiary objective of providing an historical context for FE to supplement the ‘causal and fragmentary’ (p.262) nature of previous studies is less plausible. The historical chapters explored themes which have been well rehearsed by other writers, and there were also a few inaccuracies in the relevant sections, such as the date the National Council for Vocational Qualifications was set up (1986 not 1991 as reported on p.5) and citing DfEE documents (for 1991 on pp.50-51) before the combined body had been established later in the mid-1990s.
However, Cripps' analysis is generally sound as well as being methodologically unusual and interesting. Her conclusion about the development of ‘parity of difference’(p.87) between different kinds of student achievement in the sector is as worthy of the attention of practitioners and policy-makers as the assertion that ‘placing colleges in a competitive market appears to serve neither the individual, the employers, nor national need’(p.269). Those concerned with FE policy and practice in the more recent era of lifelong learning have much to gain from Cripps’ exploration and careful analysis of policy trends in the sector over the last fifty years.