

Learning's new dawn

Interview **Julie Nightingale** Photographs **Jim Varney**

Kathryn Ecclestone has long championed opportunities for vocational learners and sees formative assessment as a lynchpin in the process

Kathryn Ecclestone didn't set out to be a teacher or anything to do with education. As a politics graduate, she landed a lowly job as a BBC clerk, hoping to work her way through the corporation to fulfil a long-held ambition

to become a campaigning journalist. But the clerk's job bored her. Impatient to be getting on with life, she quit and, with nothing much else on the horizon, found a job working with the young unemployed. It was here, in the late 1970s, that she found her social conscience awakened.

"I fell into teaching through further education (FE), which was then a very marginalised and unknown route. I started out as a supervisor for life and social skills on a Youth Opportunities scheme. Schemes were run by colleges, LEAs, private providers and I worked for the YMCA.

"In the early 1980s, a lot of those schemes were brought into formal FE. The government wanted to find ways to keep those young people who would otherwise want to leave and get work in the system and to create qualification and assessment systems for them. Those of us involved were seen as a new type of teacher in FE and I got embarrassingly evangelical about 'records of achievement' and 'portfolio-based assessment' and 'competence-based assessment'."

Youth work

Working with young people, whose poor experience of education contrasted with her own experience – at a grammar school in Oxford – and whose life chances, at 16 and 17, seemed already diminished, effectively changed her life.

"It was only when I worked with the young people on those schemes that I got a strong political sense of inequality and social justice that still is my driving force."

It set her on a path that has led to her becoming one of the country's leading experts on assessment, specifically in further and vocational education. Until recently she was deputy director of the Centre for Lifelong Learning at the University of Nottingham and has just been appointed professor of post-compulsory education at Oxford Brookes University.

She lists her research interests as "the principles, politics and practices of assessment" and its links to "learning, motivation and autonomy".

Ecclestone explains: "When policymakers create an assessment regime that teachers have to implement on the ground, they obviously have laudable aims – promote engagement, increase motivation, make independent learners.

"I'm quite interested in disentangling those mantras – what is engagement, what does autonomy mean? In research I did with advanced vocational students a few

What's wrong with 'therapeutic education'?

Kathryn Ecclestone is co-authoring a book that explores how the government's focus on the emotional wellbeing of children may be undermining their education.

- She says: "In the 1970s and 80s, I worked with young people who had real difficulty getting into the labour market and also getting a good education. We never talked about them as vulnerable, fragile, having low self-esteem or in need of emotional wellbeing."

- That language has penetrated all levels of the system – schools, FE, even universities – and is applied in a blanket way, she says. So the marginalised, the young people behaving badly, the disaffected and those who have real emotional difficulties are universally treated as if they lack resilience. The emphasis in their education is consequently on developing their self-esteem and emotional wellbeing, rather than their subject learning.

- The Department for Education and Skills' policies encourages this approach, she adds, in the belief that people can't learn if they are weighed down by a lot of emotional baggage.

- "What you've got, which is fascinating but also worrying, is a massive rise in interventions into children and young people's emotions. We are calling those therapeutic interventions because they are rooted in crude ideas about trauma in childhood or stress translated into counselling approaches."

- This rapidly growing obsession with emotional vulnerability has potentially wide implications for assessment, she adds.

- "One of my FE lecturers told me recently that the college has just instructed all the lecturers not to write on the students' work because for some students that might damage their self-esteem if they'd had poor experiences at school. When you get into that sort of mindset, you stop taking risks and you stop giving people feedback that might actually improve their skills."

The Dangerous Rise of Therapeutic Education: How Teaching is Becoming Therapy by Kathryn Ecclestone and Dennis Hayes (Routledge, £18.99) will be published later this year.



years ago in FE, we could see that the same assessment methods that promote low-level motivation when you're only setting the young person external targets have the potential to engage them at a deep level."

She explains: "You can have assessment that encourages what I call procedural autonomy, that is, you learn how to navigate the system in an independent way. Or you can have critical autonomy, where you can think for yourself in a deep way."

"The autonomy has to be clearly defined – you can't just say I'm promoting autonomy with my students because all you might be doing is encouraging them to go off and hunt and gather the information on their own. That might well be a springboard for something else, but all too often it isn't."

Lately, at Nottingham, she has been working on a two-year project into formative assessment in vocational education courses and adult literacy and numeracy programmes. The aim of the project is to take some of the work done by Paul Black and Dylan William on improving formative assessment in schools and apply it to FE, vocational courses and adult literacy and numeracy programmes.

"There is a massive government push in adult education towards skills for life at the moment," she says. "We're working with different teachers in different adult education and vocational contexts to identify something in their formative assessment methods that they could improve, to work on that change with them and then to evaluate what impact that change has on the students' motivation to learn."

"We've got some very interesting themes coming through that suggest there are a number of techniques you could apply with students to help them review their progress, to understand better how they are going to be graded, to set targets and all of the things that have become mainstream thinking about formative assessment."

"What's really interesting is that the same techniques can be used in instrumental ways. In other words, they can be used simply to get the young people or adults through the targets as easily as possible. But all that monitoring and auditing form of assessment has little to do with learning."

Diagnostic tool

If teachers are spending time and using a range of techniques to assess students' work and are helping them to pass exams but not actually to learn anything, this sounds, first, like something teachers have suspected all along and, second, a very bad outcome. But Ecclestone isn't so sure. The same techniques of monitoring, auditing and so on could be used by teacher and student in a much deeper way, she suggests.

"They could be used to find out what problems a student has with their subject knowledge or why that aspect of numeracy is causing difficulty, for example. It's more of a diagnosis of learning, as opposed to a 'signing off the targets' approach."

The research so far has also shown that teachers in a single institution can be using the same ostensibly similar assessment techniques for entirely different purposes, depending on the type of student.

"For example, entry-to-employment schemes in colleges take the most difficult young people – those with serious social problems or who failed at school, a bit like some of the ones I used to teach."

"The teacher doing formative assessment can't go straight to their subject knowledge. They have to do a lot to build confidence first. So the formative feedback for the assessment would be much more about the person's self-confidence than about their subject learning."

Compared with, for example, the practice of giving feedback on progress in an advanced vocational science course, the teacher is absolutely focused on their subject knowledge, Ecclestone says.

"The important thing in understanding how to apply and get the best out of these techniques is to understand the learning



“Some trainees have one lecture on assessment and that's it. To use that familiar phrase, it's not good enough”

culture in your institution and all the factors in that culture that lead to one form of assessment or the other. So what we're trying to show is that the learning cultures of different courses in a particular institution will create a very different culture of formative assessment to another course."

FE and vocational education are currently more in the spotlight than they have been for years as a consequence of the 14-19 reforms and the introduction of the new vocational diplomas in schools from 2008. Ecclestone believes the reforms are well intentioned but that the problem has been misdiagnosed.

"The problem with the reforms is that they are bringing together two completely different goals: how to raise the status of vocational education in a culture that doesn't value it and how to deal with disaffection. The real danger I see is that 'vocational' will be synonymous with disaffected and disengaged and not vocational in its proper sense."

"The assessment approach proposed is ill-thought out and trying to do too many things in a sector [FE] where teachers are exhausted with initiatives."

One of Ecclestone's other roles is consultant to the National Board of Education in Finland, where she is an

adviser to a project to introduce new methods of assessment into the Finnish system (the current system is heavily dependent on formative rather than summative approaches).

Finland is routinely acclaimed as having the best education system in Europe, if not the world, and Ecclestone identifies some strong contrasts with the system here. In particular, change is only introduced slowly in Finland and after thorough consultation between teachers' unions, employers and government. Plus, says Ecclestone, "vocational teachers in Finland are well-paid, extremely highly qualified and have a strong sense of their professionalism so you can't just railroad change through".

(To redress the balance a little, she points out that the Finns admire aspects of our system, including how we evaluate and quality assure our assessment system.)

Finnish lessons

One of the most significant things her Finnish experience has highlighted is the difference in quality of training for FE teachers between the UK and Finland. Teachers there are much better trained, she says.

"I can see real scope for improving our teaching and learning if we paid far more attention to assessment on those training

CV

Age 51

1977 Politics degree, Lancaster University

1978-early 1990s Worked on series of training and employment schemes for young people and in FE.

1990s Teacher and researcher in higher education specialising in the principles, politics and practices of assessment and their effect on motivation and students' autonomy. Academic posts include lecturer in post-compulsory education, University of Newcastle, senior lecturer in post-compulsory education, University of Exeter, deputy director of the Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning, University of Nottingham

2007 Appointed professor of post-compulsory education at Oxford Brookes University. Other positions include member of the Assessment Reform Group and the Access to Higher Education Assessment working group for the Quality Assurance Agency

courses. They are so heavily regulated and have too many competencies in them that the trainees have to try to achieve, so the curriculum is massively overcrowded.

"There's also the small but not insignificant fact that more than 50 per cent of FE and adult education staff are part-time. In Finland they seem to have created a much higher level of professionalism and now trust their teachers more."

One change that would turn the situation around here would be to make assessment central to training, she argues.

"I would put assessment at the heart of how we get teachers to think about their teaching methods and what they're trying to do in the classroom. One of the brilliant things that Black and William's work has shown is the benefits of integrating formative and diagnostic assessment with teaching and not to separate it out, as happens in FE."

"The one-year PGCE for FE and adult education teachers at Nottingham includes three hours a week on assessment. That's unheard of – I don't know how we managed it. Some trainees have one lecture on assessment on the difference between formative and summative and that's it. To use that familiar assessment feedback phrase, it's not good enough." ■