Value conflicts in higher education teaching

Alan Skelton

Department of Educational Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

Published online: 25 Aug 2011.

To cite this article: Alan Skelton (2012) Value conflicts in higher education teaching, Teaching in Higher Education, 17:3, 257-268, DOI: 10.1080/13562517.2011.611875

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2011.611875

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the “Content”) contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensers make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions
Value conflicts in higher education teaching

Alan Skelton*

Department of Educational Studies, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

(Received 18 March 2011; final version received 5 August 2011)

This article explores value conflicts that people experience when teaching in higher education, drawing on in-depth interviews with staff from a research-intensive UK university. The article considers the relationship between values and teaching, illustrating how conflicts can occur between individual and different levels of the higher education system. Five value conflicts are then examined related to: dialogic forms of teaching; independent learning; not having enough time for students; large group lectures; and the struggle to be authentic in the classroom. These conflicts were highly personal yet speak to broader concerns within contemporary higher education. Individual responses to conflict varied. Drawing on previous research, the main response of participants in this study could be described as ‘strategic compromise’. Although one person responded to conflict by leaving the profession, the majority accepted structural constraints perceived to be beyond their control. Within these constraints people focused on aspects of practice where values could be realised, driven by personal concerns. The article concludes by discussing the potential of a deliberative approach to the study of value conflicts in higher education and its use on professional development courses for university staff.

Keywords: values; value conflict; higher education teaching; teacher identities

Introduction

It has been argued that one of the greatest challenges for teachers is to develop a personal philosophy of teaching (Carr 2005). This is a difficult intellectual project given the value-laden and contested nature of education but a crucial one to provide a moral anchor during times of social change. Clarifying our educational values helps us to decipher the ideologies that permeate the work of higher education institutions and to make judgements about the relative worth of policies, practices and particular courses of action (Barnett 2003). It enables us to respond with conviction to the everyday dilemmas associated with pedagogical practice (MacFarlane 2002) and to take up an informed position in relation to claims about what constitutes ‘good practice’ or ‘teaching excellence’ (Skelton 2005).

There is evidence to suggest that academic workers have become increasingly divided, isolated and accountable (Nixon et al. 2001). They lack ideological control over their work (Halsey 1992) and are subject to constant calls for information from external bodies. This can induce a ‘values schizophrenia’ (Ball 2003) where people begin to lose sight of their values and ask: ‘Are we doing this because it is important, because we believe in it, because it is worthwhile? Or is it ultimately because it will be..."
measured or compared? It will make us look good!’ (Ball 2003, 220). One way out of this impasse is for a ‘new professionalism’ to be constructed – one that requires university teachers to develop a confident sense of their own educational values and to engage in a dialogue about the ends and purposes of learning with others:

*Why* I do what I do is of the utmost significance. . . Without this emphasis on the moral purposefulness of practice, there could be no claim to professionalism (Nixon et al. 2001, 234, my italics).

Developing a personal philosophy of teaching and engaging in dialogue with others about pedagogical values is therefore an important yet challenging task in current circumstances. Whilst the values that underpin our teaching may be implicit, discomfort or ‘dissonance’ may occur when our values are denied in practice (Festinger 1957). People do not always respond passively to established institutional, departmental or disciplinary cultures. There is evidence to suggest that as careers progress teachers seek to realise their values and achieve a better fit between their ‘substantial’ (me-as-person) and ‘situational’ (me-as-teacher) selves (Nias 1984). Engagement, satisfaction, effectiveness and motivation are likely to increase if teachers are able to reconcile their own ‘voice’, realise their personal theories of teaching and connect with larger, collective values, this in turn is likely to foster student authenticity (Kreber 2010).

**Values in higher education teaching: constraints and enablements**

People who take up a post in higher education already have educational values and commitments based on previous experiences. Such values are informed by early childhood learning and relationships with parental figures (Salzberger-Wittenberg, Williams, and Osbourne 1999). A person’s educational values will develop over time influenced by social attitudes, political commitments and significant life events such as becoming a parent (Sikes 1997). What a particular individual recognises as ‘good’ teaching will also be shaped by experiences in formal educational settings. In the light of these experiences people develop a highly distinctive set of personal values about teaching and learning. As Archer (2003, 134) notes: ‘we are radically heterogenous as people, rather than having common ends’.

Once we begin to teach in higher education, however, we confront a social reality that precedes us, where our values meet those operating at micro, meso and macro levels of the system. For example, at the *micro* level of practice we come up against a physical environment and available resources that may enable or constrain our desire to teach in particular ways (Hockings 2005). We may also realise, when confronting the interactional demands of teaching, that we, ourselves, are the ‘problem’: we are simply not charismatic or entertaining enough to become the teachers we ideally would like to be (Hockings et al. 2009).

At the *meso* level of the department and institution we may notice during conversations on campus that we do not share what constitutes ‘good teaching’ with our colleagues. Our attempts to implement ‘student-centred’ approaches may be supported or resisted by senior staff with positional power. We may feel comfortable or restricted by the teaching traditions of our disciplinary tribe (Becher 1989) and...
probationary procedures within institutions may feel like an imposition of values rather than an opportunity for ‘new colleagues to map out where their autonomy may lie’ (Smith 2010, 588).

Value conflict at the macro level might occur when someone fundamentally disagrees with aspects of government policy that situates teaching and learning in particular ways (Hallett 2010). For example, an individual may support changes in the role and epistemology of universities (providing more ‘useful knowledge’ for industry and commerce) but oppose dominant ‘psychologized’ discourses on teaching and learning to be found in the higher education literature (Malcolm and Zukas 2001). They may agree that university teaching should be subject to external accountability whilst finding the implicit values and assumptions underpinning quality assurance models to be problematic.

The higher education system that confronts individuals and the educational values to be found either explicitly or implicitly within its policies, practices, discourses and physical spaces act as constraints or enablements depending on the individual’s values and subjective reading of the system (Archer 2003). Conflicts can occur between individual and social system at any of the three levels (micro, meso and macro) and often involve an inter-play between them. The conflicts a person recognises may not be the ones that exhibit the greatest distance between individual and system values. However, they may signify conflicts that have the most potential for personal and professional development.

Research approach

I undertook a study of teacher identities in a research-intensive university between June 2009 and May 2010. Full details of this study are reported elsewhere (Skelton, forthcoming). I interviewed 11 people from a wide range of university departments; they were aged between 28 and 54 years and 8 of 11 were men. I adopted a ‘critical-interpretive’ research (CIR) approach drawing on the relative strengths of these different paradigms (Sparkes 1992, 38–42). CIR captures the lived experiences of participants and locates them in a broader social, economic and political context. CIR therefore seeks to overcome the criticism that most research into teaching, learning and assessment in higher education has ignored questions of agency and structure, thereby limiting its explanatory power (Ashwin 2008).

The study took place within a research-intensive, urban university in the North of England, ranked within the top 10 of ‘Russell Group’ universities. The group of people I interviewed were an opportunistic sample – they were known to me personally and had taken one of the professional development programmes about teaching and learning offered by the institution. All of the people in this group wanted to improve their teaching and were willing to be exposed to new pedagogical ideas and practices – a process which, in itself, might lead to disturbance and conflict. The professional development programmes offered by the institution contribute to the overall learning and teaching strategy of the university which supports a move away from ‘traditional’ to ‘student-centred’ pedagogical approaches.

I used a semi-structured, in-depth approach to interviewing, conversations lasting between 80 and 150 minutes. The interviews were transcribed and explored the notion of ‘teaching identity’. I asked people why they wanted to work in a university
and what educational values underpinned their teaching. I invited them to talk about any value conflicts they experienced and how their practices were influenced (if at all) by their subject discipline, the institution and the UK higher education system. I wanted to find out what sort of teacher the participants wanted to be and how successful they felt they were in achieving this. As the sample was small my aim was not to generalise from the data but to raise insights, generate discussion and theorise about value conflicts in higher education teaching.

Findings

Conflicts related to dialogic forms of teaching

Respecting difference in cultural conceptions of pedagogy

Tom (interview 1, social sciences) was experiencing a value conflict between his preferred ‘dialogic’ approach to teaching (informed by Bakhtin 1895–1975) and the different conceptions of pedagogy held by Chinese students on a Masters course. Tom values making different discourses on the subject matter available and developing ‘horizontal’ power relationships with students, where they express their own views and ‘de-centre’ the teacher’s expertise. These values were informed by his experience of living abroad when younger where he was exposed to a heterogeneous culture and the Civil Rights movement. Tom expressed gratitude about working in a department where his approach to teaching was viewed positively and made possible by small, post-graduate student groups. He recognised, however, that Chinese students come to the UK with different cultural conceptions of pedagogy, expecting a more ‘traditional’ teacher-student relationship based on knowledge transfer. His response was to be respectful of the students’ experience and positioning, engaging them in dialogue and trying to learn himself from the encounter:

6 of the 8 students are Chinese ... they will engage in a discussion about how teacher and student should be positioned and the way knowledge should be transferred ... it's quite a conversation to try to deconstruct those understandings but I don't think it is respectful to tell a person who doesn't hold the same values ... that their position is incorrect, it's more about trying to explore those positions and in that collaborative journey to see whether you may both shift ... With doctoral level research practitioners I'm not so sure they position the academic as expert. I think the relationship is far more horizontal with that group.

Tom felt that he had achieved some success in realising his educational values with the Chinese students but said ‘it can be frustrating ... as I say my preference is not for didactic approaches ... but that's what's necessary sometimes’. He also felt that the structure of the course influenced his approach: ‘it’s a one year programme and there are constraints of time ... so at times it does tend towards the didactic’.

Not knowing your students

Adam (interview 3, social sciences) also wants to have a dialogue with students where the emphasis is not on ‘right answers’ but different interpretations of the subject matter. He wants students to understand the ideas, values and interests that lie behind particular arguments – ‘to challenge their assumptions’ and to explore
different perspectives through complex cases. The conflict he experiences is teaching on a range of courses and ‘not having that sustained interaction with many students’. This makes it difficult for any real dialogue to emerge. He exemplified this by referring to a student who had recently asked for a reference:

An undergraduate, he’d been there three years, I know the guy, he’s nice (but) I don’t know anything about him. I looked at his file, all there is is one sick note and his marks, that’s all we basically know about him. That’s what I feel is missing – that relationship – so that you actually know the person enough to really understand whether when you said something they understood it.

Although Adam experiences this value conflict in his classroom interactions he related it to institutional structures and system level assumptions – for example, the shift towards modular curricula and large group teaching in mass systems of higher education with reduced state funding.

**Dominant and respectful students**

Anthony (interview 4, social sciences) sees teaching as a dialogue and a way of sharing his research with students. He subscribes to a form of constructivism underpinned by liberal democratic values. He wants to provide an educational environment in which people are free to voice their opinions supported by evidence, but comes up against two main problems:

You get one or two students who dominate so you’ve got to try and find a way of reigning them in without discouraging them … others are more respectful but it’s much harder to bring them out and get them to engage in discussion.

Anthony recognises that his teaching approach creates difficulties for some students, relying on their willingness to participate, offer opinions and challenge him. In a similar way to Tom, Anthony was aware of the need to be respectful of difference and to not force participation:

There are all sorts of potential inequalities that can come into play given the way I teach … which is why if I’ve got a small enough class, then I will be acutely conscious of the fact that someone isn’t saying something and you don’t want to bully them.. so long as I understand their reasons for not talking.

**Tensions in the move to independent learning**

Eric (interview 10, science), Janet (interview 7, science), Jill (interview 9, medicine, dentistry and health) and Paul (interview 8, medicine, dentistry and health) were all experiencing value conflicts in relation to supporting students’ independent learning. They were positive about this move but felt that departmental practices and culture were undermining their efforts. Eric, for example, supervises research projects of final year undergraduate students which seek to encourage independence: students are invited to choose a topic and construct a design with staff support. Eric subscribes to an ‘anti-disciplinarian’ educational philosophy, favouring a shift away from the notion of teacher as expert. He was positive about students undertaking independent projects since this offered an opportunity to work alongside them. In reality,
however, the independent nature of the projects was compromised since students had to choose from a list based on staff research interests. Eric said this was problematic, commenting that students:


could be given significantly more freedom to choose topics within certain boundaries . . . As it is now the projects that they are offered are very strictly defined by each supervisor just to fit into their particular interests.

Like Eric, Janet wants students to become more independent and take responsibility for their learning. She wants ‘to be a facilitator rather than a provider of knowledge’ and is currently:


trying to get the students enough interested and engaged so they learn for themselves . . . I don’t think I’m anywhere close, but I’d like . . . to have conversations with them about (subject) rather than them treating it like a school where they have their homework to do and they’ve only done half of it.

Janet locates this value conflict, however, firmly within departmental practice and culture. She acknowledges the temptation to get frustrated with seemingly dependent students, but realises, ultimately, that the department is helping to create this problem:

I think we pander to our students quite a lot . . . we probably don’t give them enough to do in the first 2 weeks . . . so after that we’re stuffed, they get set in their ways . . . We never set any ground rules . . . we give them comprehensive sets of lecture notes and we only ever examine what’s in the lectures, so they never learn any more. I think we’re doing it to ourselves.

Jill experienced similar difficulties in her practice. She is very supportive of recent moves to introduce independent learning activities (ILAs) alongside lectures within her discipline. However, the ILAs were designed with a prescriptive set of learning outcomes. Jill tried to encourage the students to actively participate but they appeared to experience difficulty in making the transition towards effective working within a university context. However, Jill also felt that students were receiving contradictory messages from the teaching team about the nature of independent learning, with some colleagues struggling to come to terms with their new role:

A couple of occasions when I was waiting outside to start my session I heard some of the other ILA facilitators and it was just unbelievable . . . just doing completely didactic teaching. One chap . . . he was absolutely hammering the students for not knowing the minutiae of details . . .

Paul’s approach to teaching involves a mixture of lectures, seminars and laboratory-based clinical work. He considers his subject to be a ‘problem subject’ in that many students find it difficult, have little foundational knowledge and doubt its relevance to their course. This leads to a conflict relating to his expectations:

The students that I struggle with the most are the ones that don’t get involved, they’re aware that they struggle (but) they don’t get proactive about it, they don’t try and fix it, they don’t do extra examples, they don’t come and see me.
Paul believed that the students were afraid to approach him for fear of being marked down for not being ‘independent’. He also recognised that this value conflict was partly influenced by the wider departmental and institutional context – teaching a difficult subject but needing to attract a specific target number onto the course. Paul’s response to the conflict was to use the first two months of contact to build relationships, develop study habits and shift student perceptions of the subject and its relevance. He said this initial period was difficult for student ‘outliers’ in the group – those who already had foundational knowledge to progress at a quicker pace.

Not having time for students

Linda (interview 11, social sciences) perceived there to be a value conflict between what she valued most about university education (teaching) and what was valued by her department and institution (research). When she took up her post at the University she thought it was ‘the absolute perfect job for me’. She had become disenchanted with her previous work in industry because there was too much emphasis on sales and not enough on helping people. Teaching in a university offered her the chance to be ‘the person I knew I always had been but hadn’t quite been able to be’.

She had been appointed on the basis of her experience of working at a senior level in industry and her willingness to offer courses that were employment focused. However, four years into post Linda experienced a shift in departmental culture with an increasing emphasis on meeting institutional demands for research output. She felt under pressure to conduct research on top of a heavy teaching timetable and this gradually began to influence her interactions with students:

It got so that students would be coming to see me and I’d be thinking ‘f--- off’ . . . That just made me realise this is ludicrous. I’ve come in because I want to help students and give them a future and my impulse is for them to go away because I haven’t got time for them anymore and that just felt really conflicting.

Eventually Linda left her post, saying that she did not feel supported by her department and that teaching was under-valued: ‘suddenly I was the trouble maker . . . when all I was saying was that teaching really matters and why can’t you value me for what I am?’ Linda believed that the difficulties she began to experience were related to the pressures of working within a research-intensive culture. Her initial response to the conflict was to try harder and to ‘talk up’ the place of teaching in formal staff meetings. However, eventually she left the institution saying: ‘I discovered about myself that if I’m not valued I find it very hard to carry on’.

Trying to make large group lectures interactive

Colin (interview 5, science) and Martin (interview 6, Medicine, Dentistry and Health) were both experiencing value conflicts in relation to large group teaching. Colin values inquiry based learning, learning by doing, students taking responsibility and a co-operative teacher–student relationship. He said that it was possible to realise these values in post graduate work with students. However, most of his teaching involves giving large group lectures to undergraduates where the emphasis is
on covering a lot of foundational content in a short period of time. Colin asks the
students questions to make the process more interactive but concluded: ‘there’s
always that time pressure ... I’m meant to teach (subject area) in four 50 minute
lectures, that’s impossible’.

Martin draws on his extensive professional experience to help students under-
stand difficult concepts and apply them to real-life situations. He enjoys teaching and
has a high regard for students: ‘most of them are enthusiastic, buoyant people and
you get quite a lot of positive feedback from them’. The curriculum of his own
discipline has moved towards a problem-based learning approach and he supports
this move, valuing the notion of the ‘teacher as facilitator’. Sometimes he still has to
lecture to large groups of over 200 students which conflicts with his values, since he
finds it difficult to maintain student interest and enthusiasm. Like Colin, in this
situation Martin tries to increase student engagement by making the sessions as
interactive as possible.

The struggle to be present and authentic in the classroom
A core value for David (interview 2, social sciences) is the civilising role education
plays in personal and social development:

It is about modelling the most positive and healthy and socially productive forms of
social behaviour that you can imagine within the classroom and I would subscribe to that
rather old fashioned civilising notion of education that it makes you a better person ...

During his interview, David talked about a conflict he had recently experienced
within his practice. Hampered by long hours of teaching and week-end preparation
he felt he was becoming somewhat desensitised to students and their concerns and
experiences. This created feelings of discomfort since this was not the sort of teacher
he wanted to be. Drawing on the work of Carl Rogers he said he wanted to be more
‘present’ in the classroom – to engage more meaningfully with students and respond
to their contributions with greater sensitivity:

I was teaching a lot ... I was regularly spending Saturdays preparing those classes ... it
started feeling very much like (time before the class) I’d become this person and at (time
at end of the class) I’d stop being that person and that was a very uncomfortable feeling.
So I started to try and get in touch with myself in the classroom and what I mean by that
is responding more sensitively to students and students’ attitudes or responses, being
happy to introduce more aspects of their personal lives and conversations about
education. ...

Discussion
The value conflicts reported here led to significant personal and professional
discomfort for the individuals concerned – a sense that they were not teaching in a
way that was fundamentally ‘right’ and/or morally defensible. The conflicts evoked a
feeling that something needed to change and students were being let down. At the
same time conflicts often pointed people to pedagogical issues that were potent sites
for professional development.
The focus of many conflicts was on processes, methods and relationships. This appears to be consistent with general trends within the sector – for example, the move from teacher to student-centred learning, the dominance of ‘psychologized’ understandings of teaching within the higher education literature (Malcolm and Zukas 2001) and the increasing neglect of disciplinary knowledge in curriculum design and assessment procedures (Shay 2008). It is evident from the data presented in this article, however, that conflicts over processes, methods and relationships were experienced deeply because they undermined student access to disciplinary knowledge and the different discourses that could be brought to bear on that knowledge through dialogue and sustained interaction.

The value conflicts identified in this study may also reflect aspects of the sampling frame – participants had taken a professional development course about teaching and learning where they were exposed to new ideas and encouraged to question existing practice. Such courses – both in this institution and generally within the UK – are supporting a move away from traditional didactic approaches to a more student-centred pedagogy. Further research on value conflicts in higher education teaching might usefully address the experiences of people who have retained traditional philosophies of teaching based on knowledge transfer.

The conflicts that have been described in this article are uniquely personal but speak to shared issues and concerns within higher education. For example, Tom’s experience can be placed within the context of internationalisation and the growing recognition that current policy may unintentionally create conflicts given different cultural conceptions of pedagogy (Wu 2002). Tom is unlikely to be alone, therefore, in experiencing a value conflict of this kind, and his particular response to the conflict is instructive in putting forwards an approach to inter-cultural learning (see also Skelton 2005, 102–115). In a similar way conflicts related to independent learning in higher education may feel personally troubling to Eric, Janet, Jill and Paul but they may reflect problems inherent in the concept itself and/or with the way it is being interpreted within the UK. For example, it has been argued that although students expect and want to be independent, ‘dominant constructions of the independent learner are gendered and culturally specific, and as such are inappropriate for the majority of students in a mass higher education system’ (Leathwood 2006, 611).

Whilst all the conflicts are experienced at the micro level (e.g. classroom, lecture theatre), they are often located within broader departmental, institutional and system level structures. For example, Adam’s desire for more dialogue with students is frustrated by the anonymity of teaching large groups within a mass system and modular curriculum. Eric, Janet and Jill’s attempts to support independent learning come up against departmental cultures and established practices which struggle to accommodate new constructions of the learner. Although David personally owned many of the difficulties he experienced in being more ‘present’ in the classroom, ultimately these difficulties were influenced by a demanding work schedule requiring regular week-end preparation.

The ‘size’, significance and meaning of people’s value conflicts varied as did their response. For example, David thought that conflicts were inevitable and not to be viewed negatively. On the other hand Linda’s experience severed fundamental values – what she had come to university for (to teach), her identity (teacher not researcher) and what she needed relationally (to be valued). It is not surprising that she chose to leave.
Previous studies conducted in school and higher education settings have identified the different ways people respond when confronted with a mismatch between their educational values and those of their institutions (Archer 2008; Becker 1970; Sikes, Measor, and Woods 1985):

- conform to and internally assimilate dominant values and expectations;
- resist these values and expectations where they conflict with our own;
- strategically compromise: show agreement whilst retaining inner reservations;
- focus attention and behaviour on aspects of practice where values can be realised;
- protect the self through work on the psyche and create support networks; and
- exit the situation – leave the job or fulfil job requirements with little emotional investment and/or psychological engagement.

This work provides a useful framework for discussing the responses of the teachers in the research presented here. For example, there was little evidence that they simply conformed to dominant values and expectations about teaching within the institution. Although Colin acknowledged that four lecture slots within a content packed undergraduate curriculum constrained how he taught, he was still trying to include questions to make them more interactive. Overall there was a sense of ‘strategic compromise’ amongst the participants – of accepting structural constraints beyond one’s personal control whilst holding private reservations about their pedagogical impact. Within these constraints people appeared to be focusing on aspects of practice where they felt values could be realised. Overall, Martin was positively engaged with his work but he tried to spend little time with forms of teaching that held little value for him (lecturing to large groups). Linda, as noted previously, exited the situation by leaving the institution.

**Conclusion**

The value conflicts that individuals experience when teaching in higher education are a very private affair. However, these conflicts carry great significance – they can drive us intellectually and developmentally, and they can represent the problems that people most want to ‘fix’, both for themselves and their students. Value conflicts can also be, as we have seen with Linda, the very things that keep people awake at night or drive them away from the profession.

In the UK, the Higher Education Academy (HEA) has attempted to establish a unifying set of values for higher education teaching as part of the professional standards framework (the framework includes five value statements, e.g. ‘respect for individual learners’). To become recognised by the HEA, people need to demonstrate how these values underpin their teaching and support of learning.

One of the accepted problems with adopting rule-following or compliance approaches to educational values is that they restrict a full engagement with ethical questions. As Macfarlane (2005, 35) notes: ‘They do nothing to engage professionals in a moral debate or get them to reflect critically about their practice’. Different approaches to the study of values and value-related questions have been identified in the literature (see Hill 1991, 22–8, for a helpful overview). Stephenson et al. (1998, 5–6) distinguish between a Socratic tradition based on ‘values clarification, critical
thinking exercises and conversation in which value positions are articulated and critically appraised’ and a tradition linked to the work of Aristotle where people use universal moral virtues such as friendliness, honesty, justice and courage to guide their behaviour.

My own view – and one that is informed by the research presented here – is that a deliberative approach involving the exploration of values and value-related conflicts in higher education teaching has much to offer. Such an approach provides an opportunity for a deep engagement with fundamental questions, namely: what educational values should underpin my practice? How might these values be translated into action within the classroom? Why are some of my values being denied? What might I do next? A deliberative approach of this kind seeks to clarify values and help people to make informed decisions about how to teach in complex situations and institutional circumstances.

A deliberative approach would help to support a vibrant and pluralistic higher education community where the discussion of pedagogical values would become an accepted part of professional life. It draws upon notions of ‘deliberative democracy’ advocated by Halpin (1999) and Young (1996). Halpin argues that to improve the dynamics of democratic involvement we need to move to modes of interaction that are less confrontational and more explorative and conciliatory. Young adds that to promote trust people in democracies need to explain the personal, cultural and historical contexts that shape their values and perspectives. This helps to generate shared understanding and continued dialogue. These ideas are consistent with the deliberative approach to values and value conflict in higher education that I am advocating here. They are able to recognise the different disciplinary contexts in which people work (Becher 1989) and are more consistent with the intellectual culture of higher education than the adherence model advocated by the HEA, where professionalism is associated with compliance to set standards. Adherence and compliance models are unlikely to lead to ‘deep learning’ about values that underpin higher education teaching and what to do when value conflicts occur in practice.

To engage seriously with value-related questions is a challenging task for all those involved in higher education. Initial and continuing professional development courses about teaching and learning represent important spaces where people can explore and develop their educational values and learn from the examination of value conflicts. To be authentic, such spaces need to acknowledge the micro, meso and macro level constraints that may make it difficult to realise particular educational values and to support people in developing personal responses to such circumstances.

References


Leathwood, C. 2006. Gender, equity and the discourse of the independent learner in higher education. *Higher Education* 52, no. 4: 611–33.


Skelton, A. Forthcoming. ‘Teacher identities’ in a research-led institution: In the ascendency or on the retreat? *British Educational Research Journal*.


