FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

FETL PROJECT

HOW CAN PSYCHOANALYSIS AND SYSTEMS THEORY CONTRIBUTE TO THE LEADERSHIP OF THINKING IN THE UK FE AND SKILLS SECTOR?

THINK PIECE: USING SYSTEMS THEORY IN LEADERSHIP

1. INTRODUCTION

This project is part of FETL's 2015 programme of grants designed to further the leadership of thinking for the FE and Skills sector.

The think piece is the first of nine. They will be published monthly on the FETL website between October 2015 and June 2016. The ideas for the think pieces will be developed through one-day strategic seminars with a range of leaders in the sector. The views expressed however, are the responsibility of Working Well.

The Think Pieces will address the themes of the strategic seminars:

- Using systems theory in leadership
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Love Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Attachment Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Presence Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Compulsion Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Persecution Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Loss Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Aggression Got To Do With It?
- Leadership of Thinking: What's Oedipus Got To Do With It?

1.1 Project outcomes

Through the strategic seminars and think pieces it is anticipated that the project will lead to:

- New thinking about the leadership of thinking in FE and Skills
- Knowledge and understanding of key psychoanalytic concepts and systemic thinking, and evidence of their application to the leadership of thinking now and for the future
- Increased capacity in the sector to:
  – have confidence to take its place authoritatively in the UK education system
  – work at the level of the whole system;
  – work with person, role and system;
  – think and remain thoughtful;
  – integrate intellect and emotion;
  – value and use curiosity and imagination in all aspects of its work;
  – identify and address blocks to development (in the self, the organisation, the system);
  – connect psychoanalytic and systemic concepts to pedagogy for the benefit of progressive, future facing vocational education and training
- A group of informed participants (the strategic seminar attendees) who can use their knowledge and increased capacity to influence the leadership of thinking and the development of the sector.

1.2 Strategic seminar participants

There are 15 leaders from across different types of provision and regions in colleges, skills providers and policy in England, Scotland and Wales.

1.3 The Leadership of Thinking

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Before we discuss the themes that emerged from the seminar, a word about why are we focusing on the leadership of 'thinking' as opposed to the leadership of 'doing'. This is FETL's focus and it is also the backbone of what we do at Working Well. While leading 'doing' is of course important, it inevitably means acting within existing paradigms rather than questioning, reshaping or creating new ones. We believe the leadership of 'doing' is therefore insufficient on its own in today's constantly changing and unstable environment. And leading 'doing' cannot ever be sufficient for leadership of organisations whose task is to further education and training, i.e. organisations in which thinking is key to mission and purpose.

Leading thinking focuses on developing and sustaining the capacity for thoughtfulness and reflective practice. This involves valuing and supporting the on-going endeavour to make sense and meaning: of organisational purpose in changing social times and how it translates into organisational design, structures, practice and ways of working within a complex, emergent and changing system; of the whole system; of competing interests and demands (within the system and acting upon it); of issues of authority, role, task and boundaries (including informal and emotional as well as formal, and how these aspects of an organisation are managed and transacted).

We think that leading thinking in FE and Skills means encouraging all members in the system (staff, learners, stakeholders, policymakers) to actively engage in education – not just in relation to the specific areas of the curriculum, but to the curriculum as a whole and the organisation as a learning community. It means encouraging them to reflect, debate and extend thinking, and creating a culture in which the imagination has a valued place in all elements of the operation. That includes learners, staff and stakeholders being encouraged to think about and imagine the organisation as an entity – how it is, how it could be, their part in it and how that connects with the community and the wider world. It means engaging in discussions about diversity and difference (in the system and beyond it); staff being enriched through discussions on pedagogy and purpose; learners being enriched through discussions about their part in the organisation's development, their agency in their own development and in imagining different futures for themselves. And it means connecting learning and education to personal development and group processes.

This is not easy to achieve. We hope that the think pieces from this project will contribute to the debate.

2. SYSTEMS THEORY

Systems theory has an important place in the leadership of thinking as it provides an understanding of the whole system and the interrelatedness of its parts.

Taking a view, for instance, of a college, workplace or community learning provider as both part of a wider system (education and training, social, economic), and as a system in its own right, strengthens the analysis and understanding of a multiplicity of data and situations. With this, leaders can be adept at identifying leverage points, and shape their interventions to maximise effectiveness.

Systems theory also brings into focus the core issues of organisational design, structures, purpose, authority, roles, tasks and boundaries. This includes the formal and informal, known and unconscious aspects of all these elements. Such dialogue is critical to flexible, changing organisations, and to ensuring staff continue to feel connected, understand their place in the whole, and have a deep sense of, and commitment to, their roles.

3. EMERGING THEMES

3.1 To be or not to be?

This question was posed in the seminar in relation to leadership of the sector now. We think it can apply to a raft of issues facing the sector beginning with to be or not to be a sector?

The lack of coherence and fragmentation are clear. Is it perhaps, as one participant suggested, a system with a common primary task and many different parts in it, rather than a sector? Or is it an umbrella term for different linked bodies? The analogy to a family was made: you put up with family members you dislike, or don't agree with, or don't have anything in common with simply because they're family. Is that the FE and Skills sector? For some participants what is important is being part of the wider education sector. But does that, as one participant thought, weaken FE and Skills in terms of its power and position? Would it always be relegated to the under-class part of the education sector? Or can it gain strength by being part of the wider sector? Questions of class, privilege and parity run throughout the whole education sector. HE is at the top of the tree. Within FE and Skills, FE Colleges have traditionally been at the top and Skills Providers seen as lower class. It is perhaps still perceived in this way, although the Skills part of the sector is now favoured by Government, so different hierarchies and identities may be emerging.

In terms of process and content the name 'FE and Skills' is artificial: the Skills part of the sector involves further education and Further Education involves skills. We wonder whether the name implies the deeply held split in the UK between skills and education. A split that is to do with class. A split that narrows the meaning of both terms.

So the question, to be or not to be a sector, seems to us to be both about complex questions of identity and also about political power and position within the overall UK education sector.

The difficulty of conceptualising the sector as it changes may link to what one as one participant described as a state of 'organisational dysmorphia', i.e. "a deformity or abnormality in the shape and size of a specific part of the body, which is associated with high levels of anxiety." This links to the notion of 'primary risk':

> "The primary risk is the felt risk of choosing the wrong primary task, that is, a task that ultimately cannot be managed. …the risk is an emergent property of the enterprise's existing relationships to its environment."
> L. Hirschhorn, 1997.

Identifying primary risks but still being able to choose and determine primary tasks (the key task(s) an organisation has to perform in order to survive) without becoming paralysed, is key in an uncertain, precarious, environment. As one participant put it: "What if we're all in our little tents and a juggernaut's coming down the highway?"

Implications for the leadership of thinking

Perhaps the issue is less about answering the questions about what the sector is, or if it is a sector, and more about posing them as a starting point for exploration of the meaning of the FE and Skills sector as it evolves. And recognising in the exploration that the meaning or meanings may need to be made as much as found. Such meanings will help to give shape to generativity in the sector. We wonder however, if the sector is still wedded to an identity as the under-dog and if so whether this will constrain attempts to reconceive it differently.

3.2 Anxiety

High levels of anxiety, stress and strain in the sector were present from the outset. Two participants couldn't attend at the last minute due to urgent external demands, including an Area Review Meeting. Leaders in the sector have to manage their own anxiety as well as contain anxiety from those around them. It seems that some of the current communication within the FE part of the sector is in fact swelling anxiety between leaders. This presumably arises from leaders feeling very uncontained, but paradoxically increases the anxiety and lack of containment. That of course makes it much harder for leaders to contain their staff. As one participant said: "If you feel that anxious yourself you'll just transfer it down." The tents with the juggernaut referred to above depicts the thin line between anxiety and terror. Participants questioned the possibility of coping with this new world (and its injustice). The stress on interpersonal relations was acknowledged. One participant asked "how do people interact with each other, or with the work, and does this link in tern to how students interact with each other?"

Implications for the leadership of thinking

One of the first things to go in the face of high anxiety is the capacity for thinking. So the leadership of thinking is dependent on the ability to contain anxiety on one's own and others' behalf, to recognise and address the impact of anxiety and to try to keep thinking. It demands that leaders hold onto to a certain state of mind – one that tolerates not knowing, uncertainty and the vulnerability of this.

3.3 Binary or integrated thinking

The duality of FE and Skills, the inherent problems with the meaning and purpose of the sector as a whole, as well as its place in the wider education sector, seem to us to run throughout the sector in many ways and at many levels. Striking images emerged in the seminar, such as a tsunami in which there was also fertility and hope. In this case anxiety and extreme turbulence and destruction are combined with the hope of a fruitful survival. In other ways though thinking appears to be binary, and a coming together or integration experienced as impossible. We wonder if this is linked to the anxiety involved in hope in the sector now. The difficulty in integration is illustrated by the contrasts that emerged in the seminar of, for instance, optimism or catastrophe; cognitive or emotional; order or chaos; a sector that is future looking or a sector rooted in the past.

Implications for the leadership of thinking

The duality at all levels in the sector produces an inbuilt tendency towards binary thinking. If this is recognised, it can be used to understand the emotional as well as structural divides in the sector. That then allows the possibility of integrating thinking so that leadership now is realistic and effective, and at the same time finds a place for imagining a different future.

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