When you’re smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector

Susan Wallace

Education Department, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

Published online: 05 Sep 2013.

To cite this article: Susan Wallace (2014) When you’re smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector, Journal of Further and Higher Education, 38:3, 346-360, DOI: 10.1080/0309877X.2013.831040

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2013.831040

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 licensors 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
When you’re smiling: exploring how teachers motivate and engage learners in the further education sector

Susan Wallace

Education Department, Nottingham Trent University, Nottingham, UK

(Received 22 February 2013; final version received 14 April 2013)

This paper is based on a one-year research project in the UK designed to investigate teachers’ strategies for motivating learners and managing non-compliant behaviour in the further education sector. Carried out in collaboration with 203 teachers in three colleges of further education, the inquiry set out to identify, through the use of observations and focus groups, the learner behaviours most commonly identified by teachers as ‘challenging’, and the methods teachers employ to successfully address these. It also sought to capture teachers’ theories about the possible causes of non-engagement, with a view to incorporating findings about both theorising and practice into sessions for initial teacher training and continuing professional development. Drawing on these data, this paper suggests that lack of motivation in the 14–19 age group is a common phenomenon across this range of colleges, manifesting in behaviours such as lack of punctuality, failure to submit coursework and refusal to remain on task; and that experienced teachers are no more effective in managing such behaviours than teachers new to the profession. The implications in terms of teacher education and development are discussed in the final section, which points to evidence that, although positive teacher–learner interaction is found to be productive in addressing the immediate symptoms of disengagement, participants in the study consider the root causes to lie beyond their control.

Keywords: professional development; motivation; behaviour; further education

Introduction

The further and vocational education sector in the UK is currently in the strange position of being unsure what to call itself. The term ‘Lifelong Learning’ has become associated with a set of policy initiatives instigated by the Labour governments of 1997–2010 which have subsequently been overturned, beginning with the dissolution of Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK), the sector skills council set up in 2005 to regulate the professional
development of teachers and trainers in the post-compulsory sector and to manage what had become known as the ‘LLUK standards’ for teacher training. Following a period of uncertainty between this dissolution and the publication of the findings of the Lingfield Review (2012), it is now apparent that teachers for the sector will still be expected to gain a sector-specific teaching qualification. Meanwhile, the terminology employed by the sector to describe itself is reverting to some of its previous, non-politicised aliases: Further Education (FE); Further Education and Training (FET); Vocational Education and Training (VET); or Post-Compulsory Education and Training (PCET). Colleges of FE play a key role in this sector, and it is the teaching and learning in such colleges which provides the context for this research. Therefore ‘FE’ will be the term used in this paper to indicate the sector as a whole.

When embarking on their training, applicants to the profession are often asked why they have chosen to teach in further education rather than in schools; their answer often makes reference to their belief that learners in this sector are there because they want to be, and are therefore likely to be more highly motivated and better behaved than those who are still in school and subject to compulsory attendance (Wallace 2007). Their first days of observing experienced teachers at work in the sector are often experienced as a sharp contrast to these preconceptions (Wallace 2002; Spenceley 2007) as the extent of de-motivation and non-compliance among some groups of learners becomes apparent. The purpose of the research described in this paper, therefore, was threefold: it was designed to discover the most frequently encountered examples of disengaged or non-compliant student behaviour observed in a sample of three colleges of further education; to explore the strategies which teachers and trainers employed to successfully address these; and to extrapolate, where possible, the theorising that underpinned teachers’ strategies. The ultimate purpose of this categorisation and exploration was to inform the content of university-based teacher training sessions and programmes of continuing professional development (CPD) for the sector, so as to encourage teachers and trainee teachers in a critical and analytical approach towards student motivation and behaviour, as well as offering them a repertoire of relevant skills. The research was carried out as a collaborative project between a UK university and three centres of FE: one serving a wide area combining both rural and urban populations; one serving a disadvantaged urban population; and the third drawing its students from a small town with a fluctuating Traveller population.

Low levels of motivation and high levels of disengagement among some groups of 14–19-year-olds on vocational courses in colleges of FE have become increasingly apparent over the past two decades (see for example, Reeves 1995; Ainley and Bailey 1997; Wallace 2002; Fuller and Macfayden 2012). A number of explanations have been offered for this, as we shall see in the following section, ranging from the nature of the
vocational curriculum itself to the argument that learners find themselves on such courses by default rather than through choice. It is also relevant to this inquiry that, from 1999 to 2010, there was a clear policy discourse asserting the need for a qualification linked to professional standards for teachers in this sector of education and training; a discourse whose subtext could be taken to suggest that learners’ poor behaviour and lack of motivation may be due to some deficiency in the standard of teaching they receive (Wallace 2007). The current indications that this policy may change (Lingfield 2012) do not necessarily signal an end to what Ball (1990, 18) terms a ‘discourse of derision’. It is important, therefore, to stress that the research described in this paper sought to identify good practice not as a means to ‘correct’ teachers whose styles or strategies are unsuccessful in encouraging students to engage with their learning, but rather as a pragmatic approach to discovering and sharing what works most successfully (Moore 2004). Its aim was not uniformity of teaching approach, but rather to equip teachers with a repertoire of possible strategies and theories which they could employ in the best interests of the learners.

Themes in the literature
While there is no shortage of literature relating specifically to the behaviour management and motivation of learners in the context of compulsory education, there is much less relating to the further education sector. However, although, as we have seen, there is a common-sense assumption that ‘post-compulsory’ equates with ‘voluntary’, there is nevertheless a section of literature aimed at FE practitioners which falls into the instrumental ‘how-to’ category (for example, Vizard 2012; Wallace 2007a; Wallace 2007b). This literature offers strategies and advice for teachers and is relevant to this research in two ways. First, such strategies and their degree of success might be expected to be observed during the gathering of data. Second, such literature is inevitably predicated on a simplified causal model in that it appears to be saying to the teacher, ‘if you adopt this strategy the learners will be more likely to behave themselves’; an instrumental approach to some extent shared by this research in as far as one aim is to give practical support for professional development. More problematic, however, is the notion of a deficit model of teachers or learners, or indeed both, which this inquiry – like the range of ‘how-to’ books – might be seen to imply. It is important to take into account, therefore, the significant thread of literature which argues that the origins of learner disaffection in FE lie outside the individual teacher’s power to remedy or control. In this context, teachers’ behaviour management and motivational strategies are understood as ways of dealing with symptoms whose underlying causes are systemic and endemic. This literature can be categorised into four broad arguments relating to the causes of learners’ disengagement. These may be summarised as:
Socio-economic issues and the design of the vocational curriculum

The competence-based, instrumental nature of the vocational curriculum in the UK following the introduction of National Vocational Qualifications in 1986 has meant that, for example, the provision of a wider curriculum based on a liberal education model and incorporating ‘liberal’ or ‘general’ studies such as the discussion of literature, politics or social issues was discontinued for vocational students. Instead, their learning is tightly focused on preparing them to demonstrate their competence against a set of occupational standards at a level considered appropriate to them. It has for some time been argued (for example, Reeves 1995; Wolf 2011) that the repetitious, instrumental nature of the competence-based curriculum encourages young learners to see the process of learning as a ‘can-do’ tick list, and thereby fails to engage their enthusiasm for deeper levels of understanding or for learning per se. When Reeves argues that this instrumental curriculum encourages a ‘tacit acceptance that proper education is rewarded with accreditation not by gratification’ (1995, 105), we hear an echo of William Morris (1834–1896) and his famous condemnation of ‘useless toil’, which he defined as effort which carries no ‘hope of pleasure in our daily creative skill’ (Morris 1888, 4). Alternatives to the instrumentalist curriculum have been posited by, for example, Pring (2002), who argues for a form of ‘liberal vocationalism’ which strenuously rejects the concept of learning as a set of competencies; and by Clarke and Winch (2007) who argue, among other things, for a model more closely aligned with the German dual system.

In a socio-economic climate where competence-based accreditation cannot guarantee success in the job market, the learners are well aware of the low value frequently placed upon the qualifications for which they are being urged to work (Wolf 2011). These elements are further compounded by issues of status and class, with colleges of further education recruiting a much higher percentage of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds than sixth forms and sixth-form colleges (Foster 2005; and generally students from a middle-class background with relatively low academic achievement (Thompson 2009); demographic factors which may serve to perpetuate negative notions about the value and desirability of the FE curriculum.
Perceptions of the sector, its status and purpose

Wolf’s description of the FE sector as a provision ‘for other people’s children’ (2002, 56) acknowledges with irony the common-sense perception of FE as still predicated on nineteenth-century notions of class and status, where ‘useful knowledge’ was what constituted the curriculum for the labouring and artisan classes, and where education gained in status the further removed it was from serving the world of work (Wallace 2013). What Swift and Fisher (2012, 207) refer to as ‘the ambivalent status surrounding vocational education’ may not only, as they argue, deter ambitious students from entering the sector at 16, but may also depress levels of motivation and engagement in some of those for whom it is the only option. Certainly, research suggests that the aspirations of learners in FE tend to be lower than those of learners who continue their post-16 education in schools (Baird, Rose, and Mcwhirter 2012). Moreover, since the purpose of the sector has been confirmed as one of skills training (Foster 2005), its position and status in our current ‘knowledge society’ is open to question (Bathmaker 2005); and this may go some way to explaining why the sector has come to be seen as a progression route for those who have failed at school (Thompson 2009). The devaluing of skills training in a knowledge economy is not in itself peculiar to the UK. Crawford (2011, 19), for example, points out that in American schools, too, ‘the manual trades are given little honor’, suggesting that this is because ‘craftsmanship entails learning to do one thing really well, while the idea of the new economy is to be able to learn new things’ (ibid). From the learner’s point of view, these prevailing notions about the sector and its status may undermine self-esteem and throw doubt on the value and purpose of engaging with the FE curriculum.

The instrumentalism of FE teachers’ occupational standards

Lucas (2007) argues that basing teacher training for the sector on ‘standards’ rather than on ‘knowledge’ leads to a failure to acknowledge the complex processes and motivations involved in the learning process, giving undue emphasis instead to the idea of vocational education and work-based learning as little more than learning by doing. This is not an issue restricted to the UK. Woodcock and Vialle (2010), for example, draw attention to the deficit model which they argue is apparent in teacher training frameworks for the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) sector in Australia. The introduction of such frameworks as a measure to improve student engagement is open to the criticism that learner behaviour and motivation are unlikely to be improved without first addressing political and socio-economic questions, such as the lack of employment for college leavers (Wallace 2002). The instrumental nature of the current framework could be viewed as detrimental to FE teachers’ sense of self-efficacy and professionalism, since the very debate about what constitutes ‘professionalism’ includes the
suggestion that teachers see it as lying in the willingness and ability to perform beyond the curriculum requirements (Robson et al. 2004), which might include ways of relating to learners or enhancing the teacher’s theoretical understanding of what factors will best motivate and engage them. The principles of andragogy (Knowles 1984), where the instrumental concept of ‘educating people’ is transformed into the supportive, democratic, less hierarchical idea of ‘helping them to learn’, are discounted or marginalised by a competence-based curriculum which, in Freire’s terms, could be described as a ‘banking’ (1996) approach to learning. Freire’s ideal of education as transformation, based on an approach where the relationship between educator and educatee is construed as an interaction of equals, not of instructor and instructed, is similarly sidelined by current requirements and practices. However, as Moore (2004) points out, the priority for most teachers is effectiveness, and this predisposes them to prioritise strategies that work over standardised ‘competences’.

The question of student choice in a competitive market

Since the 1988 Education Reform Act introduced Local Management of Schools (LMS), a quasi-market has operated in UK post-16 education and training, further strengthened subsequently by the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the impartiality of progression advice provided by schools, in the form of information, advice and guidance, may be compromised by the imperative to compete for the most able learners (Fuller and Macfadyen 2012). Perhaps inevitably in a culture of competition, it is the schools, not the students, who have the final choice over who will stay on after the age of 16; and, driven by performance targets, schools and sixth-form colleges will tend to recruit or retain pupils at 16 on the basis of academic achievement (Swift and Fisher 2012). Moreover, research suggests that the information and guidance schools provide about vocational qualifications may be inadequate (ibid). The extent to which students themselves are able to make a free and informed choice about whether or not to enter the further education sector may, therefore, be seen as questionable (Wallace 2007). These factors – lack of adequate guidance or a failure to be chosen to stay on at school – may result in learners finding themselves, by default, in FE colleges on vocational programmes that they have not in any real sense ‘chosen’ (Fuller and Macfadyen 2012) and which may not coincide with what they consider to be their needs or aspirations (Ball, Maguire, and Macrae 2000; Wallace 2007).

A summary of the literature

As we have seen, previous research offers us a number of explanations for the low level of motivation and the negative behaviour which FE teachers
may encounter among their students. All of these explanations have factors in common. They suggest that the origins of the problem can be found at a policy level, whether it is the application of market ideology to educational institutions and processes or the categorising of teaching skills as a set of competences. They argue that these policies serve to some extent to disempower the teacher and destabilise the profession. And, perhaps most important of all in the context of this research, they offer an alternative discourse to that which presents learner disengagement as being an indicator of deficient teaching.

**Method and methodology**

It is important to reiterate here that the research set out to discover not what teachers might be doing ‘wrong’, but rather what worked (Moore 2004) in terms of facilitating students’ engagement with their learning. To this end, it was necessary to observe teachers across as wide a possible range of subjects and at all levels of the 16–19 vocational curriculum. A total of 183 classes were observed across three FE colleges. This constituted an opportunity sample, and included teachers in their first year of teaching as well as experienced practitioners. Observation in itself presents the researcher with obvious difficulties in terms of reliability (Wragg 1999), not least because of the subjective and interpretative nature of observation findings. Lesson observations, in FE specifically, are associated in teachers’ minds with inspections and performance management (O’Leary 2012), a factor which could make them reluctant to participate. The presence of an observer would inevitably impact upon the dynamics of teacher–student and student–student interactions for the duration of the observation (Wragg 1999), and perhaps particularly so if the observer was an unfamiliar ‘outsider’. The pressure to ‘perform’ may lead the teacher to implement strategies they might not otherwise use, thus affecting the validity of the data and, even where reassurances are given that the observation will be judgement-free, the question of the implicit power relationship between observer and observed cannot be ignored (ibid). Therefore, drawing on evidence that teachers in the sector acknowledge the usefulness and value of peer observation (Peake 2006; Burrows 2008) it was decided to embed the observations in the peer observation arrangement which each of the colleges implemented regularly as part of its self-assessment framework. This meant that the observations would be carried out during the course of a familiar procedure and by familiar staff, thus minimising their impact on normal interactions.

The use of observers other than the researchers themselves, however, created a different set of potential difficulties, as different observers might each have their own interpretation of what constituted key terms such as ‘compliant behaviour’ and might hold differing views on what constituted
effectiveness in terms of teachers’ motivational or behaviour management strategies. In order to address this, all 20 peer observers were fully briefed about the purpose of the research and its terms of reference and were provided with written definitions and examples of the behaviours and strategies they were asked to note, as well as a standardised pro-forma on which to record their observations. Their brief was to:

- Note all examples of learner behaviour or interaction which falls into the category of ‘lack of motivation’ or the category of ‘non-compliant behaviour’, as defined on your briefing sheet.
- Note all strategies used by the teacher which successfully addressed these.

A ‘successful’ strategy was defined as one which brought about an improvement in engagement or behaviour which lasted until the end of the lesson being observed.

These measures were designed to raise levels of reliability and validity as far as was possible. As with all qualitative research which relies for its data on the observation of, and response to, complex human interactions, this methodological approach raises a number of epistemological issues, including questions about the extent to which we can take the resulting observations as a basis for claims to knowledge about what ‘works’ in the classroom and what does not. Hammersley (2008) points out the potential pitfall for qualitative researchers of making claims about cause and effect which cannot be substantiated by the evidence. How reliable would be the notion, for example, that an improvement in learner behaviour was a direct result of a specific teacher intervention? It was considered that one indicator would be the degree of consistency in the resulting data from 183 observations by 20 observers across three colleges, and this will be explored further in the next section.

The observations were followed by a focus group meeting of the observers during which the group discussed with the researchers the process (that is, their experience) of the observations; the resulting data; and their own accounts or theoretical understandings of learner disengagement and the teacher’s role. The focus group was conducted on an informant rather than a respondent model (Powney and Watts 1987), where the participants were invited to address very open questions with prompts such as ‘tell us something about your findings’. The purpose of the informant approach is to allow the participants to open up ideas or areas of discussion which the researchers may not have thought of. It does not, like the respondent approach, restrict participant input to within the parameters delineated by researchers’ questions (Atkins and Wallace 2012). In other words, it allows for the exploration of the unforeseen. In this way the observers, as participants, were encouraged to theorise from the data collected and to share their understanding of its meaning and significance. The research was
conducted in conformity with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines (2011). All participants, whether observers or observed, provided their informed consent and were told of their right to withdraw at any stage of the inquiry.

**Discussion of findings**

The results of the observations and the outcomes of the focus group discussion can be categorised as follows:

- most frequently observed examples of unmotivated or non-compliant behaviour;
- strategies seen to be most effective in addressing these;
- focus group’s reflection on the findings and their theorising about the causes of low motivation and non-compliance in 14–19 year old learners.

Each of these will be discussed under its own heading before the findings as a whole are summarised at the end of this section.

**Most frequently observed examples of unmotivated or non-compliant behaviour**

According to the observers’ notes, the most frequently occurring indicators of non-compliance or disengagement in the 183 classes observed were:

- lack of punctuality (171 instances recorded);
- talking while the teacher is speaking or instead of concentrating on a task, so that noise levels constitute a potential barrier to other students’ learning (168 instances recorded);
- the use of phones during class time, for calls and messaging or accessing the internet or playing games (132 instances recorded);
- rude or confrontational behaviour which demonstrated a lack of respect for the teacher and/or fellow students (103 instances recorded);
- not handing work in at the required time (62 instances recorded).

There are several things to note about this list. The first is that most of these behaviours demonstrate what we might call ‘low-level’ non-compliance, and do not, on the whole, include violent, aggressive or criminal activity. The second is that, despite being non-serious in that sense, all of these have the potential to disrupt the learning of other students who might be better motivated or who would choose to be more compliant. Third, it emerged that this range of behaviour in 16–19 year old learners was found across all vocational areas, at all levels of qualification and among all groups. There
was found to be no correlation between the age, gender or length of professional experience of the teacher and the frequency of these behaviours, nor between vocational area or subject and such behaviours. Moreover, this data presented as consistent across all three colleges.

**Strategies seen to be most effective in addressing these**

In contrast to the consistent data which emerged on behaviours, the observations produced no such clear-cut evidence about the efficacy of teachers’ strategies for dealing with them. In this sense the findings were disappointing. However, and perhaps more significantly, there were indications that teachers had most success in building student motivation and encouraging positive behaviour in cases where the relationship between teachers and learners appeared positive, cheerful and mutually respectful. Representative and illustrative of observations recorded under the heading of ‘Strategies used by the teacher which successfully addressed these’ are descriptions such as: ‘joked her out of it’; ‘kept it light and kept smiling’; ‘chatted with him in a friendly [sic] way’; ‘had a laugh with them about it’; ‘jollied him up’; ‘didn’t get mad but showed he was concerned in a nice way’; ‘got her mind off it by making her laugh’; ‘firm but made it obvious she was being kind and caring’. To categorise the interactions described in this way as ‘strategies’ seems to miss something of their affective or interpersonal quality.

This aspect of the findings was discussed in the focus group. Initially the group sought to explore the causal relationship between positive, cheerful teaching and well-motivated learners, since it could be justifiably and as easily claimed in theory that motivated learners produce cheerful teachers. The majority view, however, was that a crucial factor in motivating students seemed to be the attitude and demeanour of the teacher, and that they were unsurprised that the observations had demonstrated this repeatedly. Instead of strategies, then, what emerged from the focus group’s discussion of their observations was rather a set of conditions under which vocational students are most likely to exhibit motivation and positive, appropriate behaviour, and that these conditions are recognised as necessary by the ‘cheerful’ teachers, who adjust their planning and teaching to create or accommodate them. These conditions can be articulated in the following way: students engage with learning

- when they have the ability to do the task;
- when they can see some point in doing it;
- when they can take some pride in doing it;
- when doing it fits their image of who they are.

The evidence further suggests that teachers’ experience or length of service is not a correlating factor in relation to recognising the importance
of these conditions or of adopting a positive and ‘cheerful’ demeanour. It was unclear, however, whether those teachers whose observed practice reflected this list and/or the ‘cheerful’ approach could or would articulate these as factors which played a role in their successful motivation of students. In other words, there remains a question about the extent to which they owed their success to reflection or conscious theorising on their own practice rather than to a natural disposition, a high level of emotional intelligence or instinctive pragmatism.

Focus group’s theorising about the causes of low motivation and non-compliance in 14–19-year-old learners

Perhaps some of the most interesting, if least anticipated findings to come out of the focus group discussion were the theories that teachers/observers put forward to explain the low levels of motivation and the disruptive behaviour of some sections of the FE student population. One theory popular in the focus group was that some learners’ lack of concentration did not arise from inability or unwillingness but from the fact that they arrived at college without having eaten breakfast or, in some cases, with inadequate clothing in cold weather. There was a general consensus that standards of behaviour at college were primarily influenced by the learners’ home environment and by whether parents or carers were generally supportive of college rules or of teachers’ attempts to inculcate good manners and safe practices. There was also agreement that learners could be encouraged towards appropriate behaviour by demonstrations or explanations of what was required in the workplace, so that, for example, hairdressing students understood and responded to the need for politeness and helpfulness in a salon environment, and trainee electricians would abide by work-related safety protocols. This correlation between appropriate behaviour and vocational area did not, however, emerge as a significant factor in the observation reports.

It is interesting to note that although the focus group suggested causes of student disengagement lay outside the control of the individual teacher, none of these were factors identified in the literature reviewed above – which included the instrumental nature of the vocational curriculum (Bathmaker 2005; Wolf 2011); weaknesses in the professional qualification for vocational teachers (Lucas 2007; Woodcock and Vialle 2010) and lack of learner choice and the pressures of market ideology (Fuller and Macfadyen 2012; Swift and Fisher 2012). Neither did the group identify a lack of specific pedagogic skills on the part of teachers as contributing to learners’ disengagement.

Summary of findings

Taken together, the data from the observations and the focus group discussion suggest that learner disengagement in the 14–19 age group is
observable across all vocational areas in the FE provision explored in this inquiry. Links were suggested between disengagement and learner deprivation and between learner disengagement and attitudes learned in the home environment. No specific teaching strategies for motivation or control were identified as being consistently successful. However, there appeared to be a correlation between teachers’ apparent ‘cheerfulness’ and positive levels of learner motivation and behaviour. This was also described in terms of teachers demonstrating a sense of humour and an ability to interact with groups of learners in ways that implied positive regard. This is consistent with research which suggests that some learners in FE report finding a more relaxed and mutually respectful teacher–learner relationship than they experienced at school, and feeling, as a consequence, more confident about engaging with their learning (for example, Fuller and Macfadyen 2012; Peart 2012). Similar findings have also emerged from recent research into learner engagement higher education (HE); (for example, Hunt 2012) which suggests that the relationship between learner and teacher is a factor in encouraging deeper learning. However, it should be noted that the HE focus here is on class size and its impact on opportunities for one-to-one interaction with the teacher, rather than specifically on the teacher’s attitude or approachability.

**Conclusion**

Part of the purpose of this research project, as set out in the introduction, was to identify strategies used successfully by teachers in FE to improve learner motivation and behaviour. However, although the evidence gathered suggests that some degree of disengagement of young learners in the UK’s FE colleges may be endemic, it also raises important questions about the logic and efficacy of addressing such disengagement simply by revisions to teacher training and continuous professional development programmes. While pointing to a link between disengagement and learned attitudes towards education and training, it nevertheless suggests that the key to motivating the learners in question – inasmuch as it lies with their teachers at all – consists in certain teacher attitudes and attributes rather than skills or strategies. Indeed, in suggesting that a positive teacher–learner relationship is a major factor in the motivation to learn, these findings appear to be consistent with the arguments of Knowles (1984) and Freire (1996) in their emphasis on a supportive rather than hierarchical teacher–learner relationship. They can also be seen as reflecting humanist theories of learning associated with Maslow (1987) and Rogers (1983), which argue that students’ more basic needs – for acceptance and a sense of belonging, for example – must be met before they can engage with the business of learning. Teachers’ own sense of well-being and empowerment may also be a factor here, as suggested by Woodcock (2011) in his Australian study into
the link between teachers’ sense of self-advocacy and learners’ levels of motivation.

However, it is not easy to see how teachers’ development of such attributes, values and beliefs can be addressed by the existing instrumental and competence-based set of teaching standards. Indeed, it opens up questions about what we mean by a ‘good’ FE teacher and about the criteria by which policy makers may require their competence to be measured and found wanting. Meanwhile, it remains to be seen whether current policy discourses around revision or replacement of the standards and the status and nature of qualifications for teaching in the sector will encourage teachers towards a more relationship-based and pragmatic ‘pick-and-mix approach’ (Braun, 2012, 237) to engaging the de-motivated and underachieving section of the FE student population.

Notes on contributor
Susan Wallace is Professor of Continuing Education at Nottingham Trent University, where much of her teaching involves supporting the professional development of teachers in the further education sector. Her areas of research focus on the motivation and behaviour of 16–19-year-old learners in further education, and the purposes and processes of mentoring in an education context. She spent 10 years teaching in the further education sector, has worked in a local authority advisory role and is the author of several books on professional development for teachers.

References


Wallace, S. Forthcoming. “Choosers or Losers? Progression from School to Lifelong Learning in the UK.” Annali Della Didattica E Della Formazione Docente, Special Issue: School and Lifelong Learning.


