

Caliban's Dance

FE after The Tempest

EXTRACT: CHAPTER 3



Edited by
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Cover image: *The Tempest II*, by Johann Heinrich Ramberg

### Chapter 3

# ‘They are all enchantment, those who once behold ’em / Are made their slaves forever’

*Christine Calder and Gary Husband*



As *The Tempest* opens, we are aboard a ship that is inexorably being drawn ashore in an enchantment-driven rising storm. The futility of the crew’s battle with the sea to save the integrity of the vessel offers a rich metaphor to usefully explore further education. We take the storm as our specific focus for this chapter.

Try reading this through an FE lens: the leadership of a vessel in stormy waters, aligned with the mystery of an impending disaster, itself caused by a distant and poorly understood power. The scene is saturated with allegorical potential as an analytical tool with which to explore FE. Using this metaphorical lens we can investigate power, structure, relationships and constructions of policy. In this chapter we ask: who steers the ship? Who is left to navigate the sea of policy, predicting currents and responding to the unpredictable storms?

Every ship has a master. We consider such questions as: who are the masters? Where are decisions made and by which authority; by whom and in what conditions? Is it really the master steering the ship, or as we see in *The Tempest*’s opening scene, does the practical boatswain have his hand firmly on the tiller? This offers a potential way to dissect layers of leadership and management in both a broader visionary and conceptual interpretation, and also through the daily experience of educators leading learning. Before delving into the sources of enchantment, we must seek to find the boatswains of FE and explore the realities of how those in positions of power are navigating the churning seas of policy.

In following the thread of enchantment in *The Tempest*, we try to expand the beginnings of this emerging metaphor and explore the possibility that policy itself is the enchantment in modern further education. Enchantment sounds like fairy dust but it can also be dark sorcery. Like

the incantations of Potteresque children's stories, policy often presents as an enacting wish with no explanation of how the conjuring trick is to be performed. Like magic, policy can often seem to necessitate that we pluck from thin air that which is desired or required – with no obvious resources and without paying heed to the laws of physics. Rizvi and Lingard (2009) use a working definition of policy as being the authoritative allocation of value that is published from a position of power and the assumption of compliance and agreement. This description invites a discussion around the imposition of policy.

We argue that through repetition and through the forced authoritative allocation of value, policy performs by sleight of hand the trick of fixing both the boundaries and horizons of education at all levels. As impenetrable as the enchantment on the wind in *The Tempest*, so too is policy, in its opaque and overlapping construction in FE – as evidenced by the repeated rounds of reviews of further adult education in England between 2013 and 2019. We are faced with not one incantation but many, a weave of policy that is interlinked, overlapped, entwined, tangled and – just like the waves created by the enchantment in *The Tempest* – surely erodes the shore upon which it crashes. For evidence of this see the UK Parliament's own damning review of the 2017 apprenticeship levy policy (House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts, 2019) – a perfect illustration of policy damaging a sector it was purporting to support. Where order should exist there is often chaos, and where transparency would aid the implementation, opacity frequently stymies efforts and thwarts the very outcomes the policy itself was created to produce.

Given the significant complexities of policy and the propensity for constantly changing priorities and destinations, how do we imagine a future where skilled boatswains can avoid both the tempest and the rocks, while offering critical guidance to masters? We are interested in exploring the reform of leadership in FE and how we imagine it being shaped without the need for enchantment or, indeed, a storm. A vision where the sector empowers the boatswains to not only steer the ship away from harm but also – and importantly – decide upon the desired course, delivering passengers and crew safely. So, who are the boatswains of FE and how are they situated within the structures of leadership and command?

The command structures within a large seafaring vessel run on an historically militaristic pattern of hierarchy leadership and a reliance upon titular power. The idea of management within such situations is highly contextual and the influences on leadership of environmental factors cannot be underestimated. It is not too great a stretch of the imagination to see

parallels between the leadership and command structures traditionally prevailing at sea and those within large organizations such as colleges. We can equate college principals with the master or captain who occupies a senior position. This gives us a contextual comparison and allows us to imagine middle leaders as boatswains. Boatswains sit below the commissioned ranks of senior leadership and executive, with a derived power base and distributed responsibility to leadership. This is an invidious position, that Gleeson and Shain define as an 'ideological buffer' between senior managers and lecturers, one through which market reform is filtered in the FE workplace (1999).

Before we venture into leadership as a discrete territory, let us pause to consider that leadership is not relished or desired by all managers. Gleeson and Knights (2008) point out that some managers see the responsibility of leadership alongside management as moving away from the business of curriculum. They could be described as reluctant leaders. With senior roles often focusing on performance management by inspection, results and subsequent funding, there are undeniable complications when leadership of education becomes an additional responsibility. In many cases, the burden of leadership requires the individual to revisit their reasons for accepting promotion and perhaps question their identity as a leader.

Our seafaring metaphor might collapse under examination when we consider the giving and receiving of orders. The boatswain enacts orders from above but his expertise is crucial. Being able to interpret the sea, look at the waves, the storm, the coast and the weather to determine the best course of action, advise on how to proceed and in turn be listened to, is the boatswain's role. The autonomy to enact such decisions places the boatswain at the tiller of the ship with their knowledge and experience guiding the vessel. Such autonomy is often lacking in FE, as middle managers (the boatswains) are seldom trusted to lead; they are expected to simply enact and implement orders from above. As Ball (2003) highlights, lecturers and middle leaders have become gripped by what he terms 'value schizophrenia': fearing the consequences of non-compliance, they acquiesce with regulation and performative measures, enacting orders that are contrary to their own beliefs and values as educators. As Mather *et al.* (2012) rather bleakly point out, superficial compliance is often the best survival strategy. The boatswain in *The Tempest* is in control at the helm. Regardless of the futility of his attempts, he is afforded the trust and autonomy to at least try. He is the vessel's best and only hope. An alternative future for leadership in FE could be sought by examining the relationship between the master and

his boatswain, in particular the trust placed in their experience and their ability to read the weather and the sea.

Persisting with the maritime metaphor offers an opportunity to indulge in a brief but interesting sojourn into what we might learn about the importance of colleges as organizations and their multiple purposes within society. In 1775, restrictions implemented by both the British Crown and the new American governments effectively banned all non-military shipping and direct trade between the British Empire and the 13 rebellious colonies of the Americas. This of course had the desired effect and rapidly reduced availability of both arms and supplies, which inevitably undermined the fighting capabilities of both sides.

Furthermore, restrictions were placed upon other activities that relied on international movement: exploration, engagement with the arts and sciences, technological advancement. This had a noticeable and significant economic impact. People could not move and consequently, with communication reliant on shipping, the movement of ideas also ceased. Effectively, viewing shipping as only a means to transport goods and soldiers had such a detrimental impact on the economies of both warring factions that even before the war ended, both parties agreed to lift restrictions on all non-military shipping. Incredibly, the two nations not only traded and collaborated with each other while still at war, but also afforded protections to vessels at sea and agreed not to purposely put them under attack.

If we focus on the ship, and compare this to a modern FE college, we can begin to see the metaphoric parallels. As shipping in 1775 was not merely about transporting goods, education is not – despite the claims of policymakers and infrastructure organizations – just about training for jobs and careers. If this historical event teaches us anything that might help to construct our metaphorical FE ship, it must be not to view colleges or the whole FE sector as a single means of production. FE does more than transport students towards work. FE establishments support creativity, exploration, innovation and even a Platonic route to fulfilment. Employment may be the intended destination, but there are opportunities for so many more positive outcomes.

The parallels between FE and the ship navigating Shakespeare's tempest are now drawn, but how do they help us imagine a different future for leadership? What impact might these imaginations have on FE?

Primarily, the relationship between the master and the boatswain teaches us about trust. The master entrusted the steering of the ship to the boatswain, recognizing the experience and expertise that he brought to his responsibilities. The title of boatswain acknowledges years of learning

leading to expertise. Comparing the boatswain to those holding middle leadership roles in FE offers two perspectives. Those who are promoted to middle leadership positions may feel underprepared because they lack the training and support needed to undertake the role. While trying to balance their values as educators with the organization's focus on results and performance, middle managers often experience difficulty in reconciling their values as educators with management responsibilities. There follows a perfect storm, where individuals are appointed to roles that are poorly supported and where the demands of extensive accountability structures prevent them from practising autonomously – unlike the boatswain. The lesson to be learned is that colleges should be seeking to promote the most able and experienced individual into a role that is well supported and where that individual is trusted to lead, and not just manage. This, however, hinges on levels of trust that are lacking in performative cultures.

To conclude, when we consider the role of FE in society, the importance of its provision and the diversity of the communities it supports, we must always recognize that FE provides far more than a route to work. FE has many capable and experienced boatswains. Foregrounding their experience – and trusting them to steer and lead – could be seen as sensible sea craft.

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