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Dis/placing teacher identity: performing the ‘brutal forms of formalities’ in English Further Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper analyses how teacher identity is shaped by professional standardisation and regulatory apparatuses in the context of English Further Education from a specifically spatial perspective. We focus on how these apparatuses erode teachers’ sense of identity and, paradoxically, quality by establishing what anthropologist Marc Augé (1935–2023) calls ‘non-places’. Drawing on interview data and Augé’s spatial anthropology, we discuss how places can define, foster and erode identity and, thus, practice. Our data shows how teachers’ accounts of their changing spatial experiences reflects the transient nature of their own interpretations of how identities are shaped in these shifting contexts of ‘dis/placement’ wherein the process of identity construction frequently places individuals in contact with another side of themselves.

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Introduction

As Gert Biesta (2022, p. 1) points out, places are only produced by relationships of meaning and interpretation that are simultaneously relationships of ‘power, empowerment, and constraint’. This truism lies at the heart of ongoing debates around citizenship, workplace learning and widening participation which still define lifelong education (Holford et al., 2022). The concept of identity, while complex, remains central to these debates from multiple perspectives, and sits at the heart of this paper, which tackles this idea from a spatial point of view.

There are many reasons for this. From the perspective of lifelong education, Danish writer Knud Illeris’s attempt to shift our understanding of the concept of identity away from outdated, even educationally irrelevant models is well known (see Illeris, 2014). For Illeris, traditional views of identity represent an ideal version of identity whose stability and linear character was rendered untenable by the shifting zeitgeist of post, late or liquid modernity.¹ More recent 21st century responses to this challenge have taken a more differentiated approach to identity, notably in regarding the phenomenon as a situated echoing a wider focus on place as an important aspect of further and lifelong education (e.g. Bright et al., 2013; Jones & Maguire, 2021; Orr & Simmons, 2011; Paechter et al., 2001; Spangler & Adriansen, 2022). Purely within the pages of IJLE, the question has been discussed variously as economic or experiential (Armsby, 2013; Brown, 2005); professionally or culturally situated (Blåka & Filstad, 2007; Zoletto, 2012); literary or dialectal (McKinney & Hoggan, 2022; Thériault, 2019). Most recently, a turn towards broader, quasi-philosophical concerns such as curriculum (Billett, 2023), coloniality (Regmi, 2023), individualisation (Papadopoulos, 2023) and humanism (Kinnari & Silvennoinen, 2023) is noticeable.²

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Such studies accept the fluid nature of identity, describing it variously as constructed, negotiated, developed or played. In this paper, however, we would like to draw these strands together by asking how far the *places* of lifelong education construct – and deconstruct – identity through a process we call *dis/placement*. The point here is to help avoid some of the problems of underdetermination that are noticeable in the research cited above. Since identity is not reducible to agency (what I am capable of), enactment (how I perform), or attribution (how I am), discursively or otherwise, a sophisticated account of how relations form and operate in professional spaces is needed.

By taking a spatial perspective (which understands space, place and the entities within them, as reciprocally determined) we can highlight the properly complex nature of identity in this context. We can also examine the relations which create the (epi)phenomena to which the term ‘identity’ often problematically accrues. This provides an approach which, as Levi Bryant (2010) points out, queries any presupposition of forms of identity to which the capabilities, performances and attributes *du jour* are then appended, *post hoc*. Scholars, researchers and practitioners can thereby undertake the kind of critical scrutiny of new agencies and their emergence as well-determined objects that enter into new relations with other objects.³ As a result, greater understanding of the ways professional spaces are codetermined becomes possible, as does the likelihood of being able to act meaningfully in and on these interactive places.⁴

To define these objects and their ground(s) for interaction, we use a specific theory of how places are made – and un-made – developed by the recently departed French anthropologist Marc Augé (1935–2023). Augé’s theories of ‘non-place’, discussed in detail below, have received limited attention⁵ from researchers in the field of lifelong education and, particularly in the context of teacher identity within Further and Higher Education, these ideas are highly suggestive for the reasons suggested above. This study, therefore, explores how educational non-places, defined through cultural practices such as standardisation, scrutiny and identity labour, contribute to the formation of non-place classrooms and even non-place learning, altering the characteristics of teachers’ identities and their self-perception. The wider relevance of this analysis lies in the way it links the spatiality of identity and the longstanding international debates around regulation in lifelong education (see for example Åkerblom, 2019; Beighton, 2021; Kauppila et al., 2020).

Before turning to Augé’s ideas and their role in this analysis, we first discuss our own focus on teacher identity in an English FE college. After a brief introduction to the English Further Education (FE) sector, we offer an overview of Augé’s theory of the concrete and symbolic construction of space characterised by three attributes of relationality, historicity, and identity (Augé, 1995). We then introduce our research design and methodology before turning to our data and analysis in the context of the wider debate mentioned above. The latter connects the proliferation of standardised pedagogical approaches, driven by external pressures and expectations, and the transformation of educational spaces into Augean ‘non-places’ where adherence to prescribed standards takes precedence over teaching and learning experiences stripped of their own relationality, historicity, and identity. Teachers, in a practice space defined and confined by a lack of meaning, find themselves navigating a challenging terrain of *dis/placement*.

One of the most important of these challenges, following an Augean analysis of identity, is the erosion of the capacity of reflect meaningfully on localised teaching practices. Noticeable in observed teaching, practices, materials and attitudes are all expected to align with evaluation criteria, often at the expense of any alternative teaching beliefs. This results in a disconnect between their veritable teaching selves as volitional agents existing through time and space and the roles they assume during observations. These roles can often, as we will see, represent an erosion of identity, and this paper highlights for instance the frustration stemming from the tension between perceptions of locally authentic pedagogy and externally-mandated practices. The emphasis on compliance, measurement, and external judgement can

foster a sense of detachment from the local educational culture and dis/placement towards standardised educational non-places.

English further education

The Further Education sector in England encompasses post-secondary educational provision including colleges, sixth-form colleges, adult education centres, and vocational training providers. Its primary goal is to offer accessible and flexible educational opportunities and enable a diverse range of post-16 learners to pursue their career and personal development goals. With a particular focus on preparing learners for the workforce, promoting lifelong learning, and contributing to the overall socio-economic growth of the nation, the FE sector is characterised by its adaptability, responsiveness to evolving labour market demands, and commitment to promoting inclusivity.

At the same time, it is also often identified with a shift towards marketisation, managerialism and increased levels of accountability, primarily through the oversight of the regulatory body, the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted). Ofsted's inspections and assessments play a key regulatory role in the English education system, ultimately informing policy and improvement initiatives and practice more widely. Provision is also affected by the strategy of performing Ofsted-style inspections within internal quality review audits. In pre-emptive anticipation of the next inspection, these internal audits evaluate various facets of provision, including marking and feedback audits, student forums, and, significantly, classroom observations. The ensuing culture of continuous improvement (and compliance) has been much criticised in the scholarly literature as self-defeating, manipulative and managerialistic (e.g. Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Beighton & Naz, 2023; James & Biesta, 2007; Lucas, 2004; Naz, 2021, 2023; Orr & Simmons, 2011).

Research objectives and question

The current study endeavoured to examine the policies and procedures governing teaching, learning, and assessment within the Further Education (FE) context, specifically focusing on their application in the classroom. A central focus of the investigation was on the implications of observation mechanisms associated with quality assurance and improvement in UK FE and their interplay in practice spaces.

To understand the dynamic relations between these mechanisms, we deemed it imperative to analyse the political and ideological underpinnings that shaped the policies and practices of the contemporary educational landscape. We sought to explore the actions undertaken by FE practitioners and institutions concerning assessment and compliance schemes, investigating their relationship with teacher roles and identities. In particular we wanted to better understand how these practices impacted teachers' perceptions of their own roles, the expectations imposed by policy-makers and senior managers, and how both contribute to dis/placement of their professional identity.

The study's overarching objective was therefore to unravel the complex interplay between quality improvement schemes embedded within FE policy frameworks and their tangible manifestation in the day-to-day practices of teaching. Drawing inspiration from Marc Augé's concept of non-place to provide a theoretical lens for understanding the spatial dynamics inherent in these educational practices, the central research question emerged: 'How do the relationships between various quality improvement schemes embedded within Further Education policy frameworks manifest in the everyday practices of teaching?' The motivation to comprehend the feelings and lived experiences of teachers originated from our own background and understanding of Further Education (FE) teaching practices, which were shaped by the impact of policies and historical structural changes on the role of teachers and the associated expectations placed upon them.

Non-place

Marc Augé's theory of non-place has long influenced scholarly debate about the role of space in facilitating travel, exchange, and consumption (see, for instance, Arefi, 1999; Gebauer et al., 2015; Merriman, 2004). From an anthropological perspective, Augé argues that the deepening interdependence of nation-states has led to increasing portions of the globe functioning as a global network of consciousness, in which 'the world is like a single immense conurbation' (Augé, 1998, p. xii).⁶

This spatial homogenisation is deeply problematic for Augé, who described the day-to-day consequences as 'non-places'. These nondescript, multifunctional entities exist not just as the identikit home/office buildings and airport/shopping centres deliberately designed to facilitate the flows of consumption (Augé, 1995) but increasingly for the delivery of some lifelong education. For Augé, three psycho-social features are necessary to any meaningful place, and their absence is always troubling. The most important is perhaps *relationality*: a place can only really exist if it allows a relational link between individuals and their environment or common culture: in non-place, 'solitudes exist without creating any social bond or even a social emotion' (Augé, 1995, p. 4). This relationality, second, implies the sense of *history* required for entities to becoming perceptible as events albeit, from the point of view of identity, in a largely passive way. The individual does not make history, but instead 'lives in it', for Augé (1995, p. 12). Continually wiped clean to accommodate the actuality of the 'present' moment (Augé, 1998, p. 83), non-places become 'the real measure of our time' (1995, p. 79).

The result is not merely a-historical fluidity, but an erosion of the ability to develop a sense of *identity*. This is Augé's third characteristic of non-places, where non-place separates people from their own history, relations and identities by transforming them into groups (e.g. commuters, shoppers, customers and, in our case the ubiquitously reductive 'learners' familiar to the increasingly massified approach to lifelong, lifewide population edu-management). The space of non-place he says 'creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude' (Augé, 1998, p. 83), surrendering the individual to transience, isolation and the ephemeral in the interest of capital flows, human and otherwise. The virtual architectures produced by and for online education purposes also exemplify this phenomenon, since both the 'concrete and symbolic construction of space' require the three fundamental characteristics of relationality, historicity, and identity (Augé, 1995, p. 77). Without interaction between these three constituent parts, a place becomes a non-place where relations can no longer form through time, space or affect, establishing sites of dis/placement.

However dehumanising, it is vital to remember non-places are never predetermined: place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities, Augé says. Non-places are never totally completed because places are never completely erased (Augé, 1995, p. 79) because of the human ability to create and transform even the most dehumanising architectures. The extent to which lifelong education spaces constitute sites of dis/placement is thus a matter of ongoing enquiry.

Augé was of course not alone in highlighting such features of post/super/hyper/late modernity (see for example Appadurai, 1990; Harvey, 2001; Massey, 1994). But an advantage of examining lifelong education (and teacher identity specifically) from this perspective is Augé's strictly relational view of the question of space. As a relationist rather than a relativist, Augé is careful to avoid essentialising spaces, people or indeed the phenomena that constitute them: over time, any space can become infused with a degree of relational historical significance (Augé, 1995). Indeed, for Augé (1995, pp. 17–18) the shift towards examining such new relations is an existential one for any anthropological enquiry:

If the anthropology of near contemporaneity had to be based exclusively on the categories already registered, if it were not allowed to formulate new objects, then the act of moving into new empirical terrain would not answer a need, merely the researcher's idle curiosity.

Our aim here, is, of course to pursue the former while challenging the latter.

Dis/placed identity

In England, inspection regimes have responded to this tendency to treat teacher identity as fluid and highly malleable by instrumentalising the ‘flexibility’ of practice, practitioners and provision. Typically, the variety of contexts and technological devices, apps and platforms that increasingly make up learning environments is invoked (Department for Education DFE, 2020; Ofsted, 2023). However, despite the proliferation of such technologies, teachers are still recognised and defined by reductive observation grades. These labels homogenise diversity within a numerical flat space without depth or complexity. This reductivity eradicates the need to distinguish teachers from each other, focusing instead on the grade which is intended to represent them. This grade is not a metaphor as such (the teacher stated as being something that they are not in order to convey meaningful depth) but rather a metonymy which *re/places* the teacher as meaningful subject with an object to which they are supposed, institutionally, to be related for the purposes of scrutiny and control.⁷

Following the notion that personal and social identity are eroded in this way, we can see how standardised and homogenised landscapes of observed teaching environments facilitate the dis/placement evoked in the data below. Augé’s theory thus allows us to differentiate between day-to-day and performative practices insofar as it suggests a demarcation between spatial practices which foster feelings of identity and belongingness and those which erode them, be it systematically, symbolically or simply as a by-product of other goals. However, before examining our data in this light, we discuss our research and data collection methodology.

Methodology

A qualitative case study research design was implemented, focusing on the assessment of teaching practices through classroom observations. Ethnographic methods of inquiry, specifically involving interviews and observations *in situ*, were chosen for their potential to provide rich, authentic data (e.g. Angrosino, 2007; Berlingieri, 2017; Brewer, 2004; Dixon et al., 2010). Spatial location is of course fundamental: a Further Education College (FEC) located in London, UK, served as the primary case study context.

Initially, an invitation soliciting expressions of interest to participate in the study was extended to 33 teachers within the college. All 33 had undergone both internal and external inspections and audits, and this invitation was accompanied by a brief survey addressing aspects of their roles, the frequency of inspections experienced, and any comments pertaining to quality improvement measures. Fourteen teachers responded and, based on the depth of experience and detailed responses to open-ended questions, nine were selected. Two teachers were unavailable for interview appointments, and one had departed from the college.

Iterative, in-depth interviews were conducted with six teachers. Subsequently, all six teachers underwent classroom observations, each spanning approximately one hour. Reflective post-observation interviews were conducted with a focus on teaching practices and their alignment with the criteria assessed by both internal and external inspectors. These follow-up interviews were held in the classroom, immediately after lessons and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by both the college and the ethics committee of a UK university, and the data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to multiple rounds of coding.

The data collected from participants proved extensive and diverse. While all participants were asked consistent baseline questions regarding their everyday practice, encounters with classroom observations, student voice, and audits, the varying degrees of detail in their responses prompted a meticulous exploration to pinpoint sections aligning with the study’s key objectives or enhancing the analytical focus. Therefore, in this paper, we only included five interviews that consistently presented themes and insights, aiming to offer a sophisticated understanding of quality processes,

pedagogical practices, and their repercussions on the roles and responsibilities of professional practitioners. These selected interviews encapsulated a broad spectrum of experiences, incorporating specific and pertinent examples within expansive responses, rendering them most fitting for this study.

Because of the diversity of classroom practices themselves in this context, we chose not to follow a highly structured observation agenda. Initially we focused solely on documenting the process before undertaking post-observation interviews where teachers could articulate their experience of this process. Potential alterations for a formal observation scenario were then considered, allowing reflections on our notes from classroom observations to interweave with participants' perspectives during interviews. This enriched our understanding of the nature of their experiences since the data resulting from this process provided additional insights to complement our classroom observations. Notes from classroom observations were varied in length, contributing varying depths of data to different interviews. To maintain a focused analysis, interviews with richer insights, detailed examples, and common themes were prioritised.

Following the transcription of interviews, close reading and subsequent rounds of open and focused coding were employed to identify key themes and synthesise details that informed the research question. Transcript segmentation facilitated the assignment of meaning within the context of emerging themes across the original sample. A meticulous exploration of available evidence pertaining to the quality assurance of teaching practices – in relation to teachers' own understanding of the self – culminated in a qualitative interpretation of the evolving discourse of quality and standardisation within this setting.

Standardisation

The importance of standardisation in this context should not be underestimated: a discourse of evidenced-based pedagogical methods underpins many institutions' internal quality assurance systems in the UK (Ball, 1998; Biesta, 2009; Klees, 2008; Naz, 2023). Standardisation is established through scrutiny, notably via various observation practices, often with a focus on the 'meta-scrutiny', a kind of vicarious evaluation which assesses the administering of QA proxies. Rather than quality and practices per se, grading and feedback, success rates, student forums, and end-of-term evaluations become the object of the institutional gaze.

In FECs and elsewhere efforts to reshape educational governance and practices revolve around the objective of achieving 'good' or 'outstanding' performance as defined by nationally- defined standards. The subsequent quantification of educational outcomes, progression and achievements represents the 'objectification of educational practice' for Landri (2017, p. 13), a reality which we have linked to shifts towards meta-scrutiny via the 'documentisation' of teachers' work (Beighton & Naz, 2023). Here, a concern for concrete practice is replaced by a focus on its documentation, a 'semiotisation' of practice in FECs (Beighton & Revell, 2020) whose discourse defines the limits of educational practice.

Dis/placement occurs when such practices not only define teachers' roles of but also shape their expectations in a manner that compels them to conform to predefined standards of best practice in a space defined by such criteria. This certainly impacts not just professional judgement, which is intertwined with the spatial dimension of teaching practices, but it also affects teachers' identity by creating detachment from their teaching context, illustrating how teachers engage with both the physical and conceptual aspects of teaching. For example, Natalia⁸ explained how her teaching is reduced to meeting pre-determined benchmarks:

Regardless of how long I have taught, I think it gets to the point where. [In my lesson plan] I tend to write the instructions even as to what am I going to do, how am I going to say certain things so that you *know it's seen as best practice* ... because you know that you are ... going to be assessed ... [In observations] you sometimes are tempted to do what you normally don't do ... because ... you realise that there are implications if you do not hit the grade that you are supposed to hit

The kind of internalised self-scrutiny suggested by Natalia's anxiety about being *seen* to do the right thing has often been discussed (see for instance Ball, 2003; Coffield, 1999; Fejes & Nicoll, 2008; Proudfoot, 2021). However, an Augean analysis would highlight the way in which Natalia's obvious anxiety about the pressures of time represent teaching space as *a-historical*. Her own past experience seems irrelevant faced with the ongoing, predetermined dis/placed present of benchmarks and regulation. Writing and planning both merge with the knowledge of imminent assessment and the barely less imminent possibility of failing to 'hit the grade' and its ominous 'implications'. For Natalia at least, observed and unobserved practices juxtapose in an anxiety-ridden non-place where a distinct teaching style is eroded by the scrutiny of assessments or, rather, fear of the imminence of such scrutiny and its possible outcomes.

This teacher's compliance must be understood in connection with their personal beliefs as educators. It is driven by a framework centred on the *performance of standardisation* rather than by the ethics of professional knowledge and expertise. A maths teacher, Dylan, referred to this focus on performance, perception and image as a 'business model' (our emphasis):

The business *model* . . . it's a business. It's no longer about educating people. It's about *perception*, it's about giving the *perception* that what is going on *behind the doors* is outstanding.

Several intriguing points warrant attention here. Dylan offers a rationale for the standardisation of education and how it clashes with his personal ideology regarding teacher identity and his original motivations for entering this profession. Conforming to practices adjudged as best does not align with his perceived authentic self.

The ensuing dis/placement is literally essential for Dylan, who feels constrained to follow guidelines which define practice in terms of performance:

And you are only sustainable with bums on seats and achievements and making sure that you *give the perception* to Ofsted . . . And at the end of the day, that's *seemingly* what it's all about and that's not what when I started my career, I *saw teaching as*. That wasn't my intention to help senior managers *look good*

The term 'bums on seats' is often used to denote student numbers that contribute to funding, echoing the 'documentisation' of learning mentioned above as physical bodies are quantified *en masse* for the purposes of dataveillance and the performance of 'quality'.

The implication of creating 'the perception for Ofsted' therefore underscores the conflict between external mandates and their personal teaching beliefs, leading to emotional detachment from the profession and challenging their core identity. The sense of disillusionment, disconnection and dis/placement shows how the managerialistic educational objectives have created a gap between the existing education environment and what teaching initially meant for teachers like Dylan. It also highlights the transformation of the classroom into a 'non-place' where standardised practices take precedence over the individualised care and organic interactions. The shift towards prioritising perceptions and compliance turns the classroom into a non-place driven by dis/placed metrics, proxies and appearances, rather than learning experiences with historicity, relationality and identity.

This is not to say that nothing happens in such non-places. But, for Dylan, when change happens in educational policies, it is influenced by the practices of individuals who may be far removed from classroom spaces. Teachers like Dylan conform to these changes without necessarily being convinced of their efficacy, stressing instead their sameness and the flow of faceless ideas resumed by whichever name is in vogue at the time:

[Teachers] are doing this for the good of the student rather than because some clever clog has decided to do a TED talk on how you know we need to talk about positive mindset now. . . . Geoff Petty for example he might be the flavour of the month so everything he says is the now the law and then next month Carol Dweck will come in, 'oh she's amazing, she did this amazing thing', and then someone in government or Ofsted will go 'oh yea that's how we'll change it all . . .'⁹

Here, frustration with the shift from a focus on education to a focus on performing a façade of excellence reflects the dis/placement of their sense of professional agency and autonomy. It is, for Dylan, a repetitive, meaningless performance:

we all have to dance to that tune for the next three four years and then the tune will change again but I think that's why nothing changes

This frustration with emptiness illustrates the tension between educators' personal beliefs and the external pressures of corporate-driven dynamics that shape so many contemporary lifelong education environments. The scepticism towards the transient nature of educational trends and latest fads stems from their primary concerns about the welfare of students and a commitment to meaningful practice. Practices represented by and reduced to the names of influential figures or external authorities encourage generic quick fixes for all types of educational settings, regardless of history, relations or identity. The classroom context and the long-term impact on teaching and learning are dis/placed alongside an increasingly superficial performance of pseudo-identity.

This cyclic adoption of trends based on external influence exemplifies observed teaching spaces as educational 'non-places' where practices change rapidly but superficially and without always accounting for the spatial features that make classrooms what they are. It is in this sense that standardisation deprives teachers of their distinctive personal and professional identity by assigning them predetermined but transient roles. The ensuing conflict between the enduring identity of educators and an ever-changing educational landscape echoes the interplay between teachers' beliefs and the demands of non-place and the shifting lifelong education landscape.

Refashioning identities: from everyday pedagogy to 'fancy' teaching

There is little doubt that teachers' self-perceptions and their roles are profoundly influenced by the social and political milieu in which they operate (Zembylas, 2003). When examining the formation of teacher identity, it is certainly crucial to consider the amalgamation of teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and actions. As they engage in a substantial amount of interpretive activity to construct their identities, a form of identity labour¹⁰ is common among teachers (see for example Marschall, 2022; Peura & Hytti, 2023; Rushton et al., 2023).

In this context, teachers must be viewed as both subjects and objects of experience. Their personal experiences cannot be divorced from the larger discourse of experiences, and their actions are not solely determined by their subjectivity but are performed in line with the prevailing cultural narratives that surround them. The culture of observation and standardisation establishes templates for their performance, thereby creating a dynamic dis/place for the construction of identities – and their performance when required. A classroom, previously spatially defined by daily teaching routines, thus undergoes transformation into a non-place when it is under observation. This can actually impair practice, for Jemima:

I probably do worse teaching when I am being observed even by a friend even by a nice person. I just can't . . . When I feel I am being watched, I feel I have to kind of perform, and that doesn't mean I do better teaching, you know what I mean. [If my lesson] went off in another direction, . . . that's fine, nobody is watching it, I am free to do it. If I am being observed, I don't have the freedom to fly like that

Here, an observed classroom lacks a strong connection to the self. A sense of anonymity and control from external factors leads to a loss of autonomy and personal character. The pressing need to 'perform' for someone else shifts the educator's role from educating students to conforming to discursive expectations. The disruption of spontaneity and responsiveness by the imposition of inspection standards highlights how teachers' perceptions of who they should be are impacted by the presence of an external gaze, which serves to marginalise the social context of their interaction with students. Jemima's identity becomes a by-product of discursive norms that constrain the development of a flexible professional foundation for agency. In this context, being a teacher entails

navigating different worlds at different times, depending on the demands that may or may not align with their self-perceptions and their work.

Unsurprisingly, the end of observation marks a striking level of euphoria, presumably caused by the end of the performance

when I was finally observed, I fell about, oh I don't know, I felt [like] a feather. I felt so light and high and bouncy and joyful and I thought ahhhh. . . . and that made me realise how much stress it had built and built and built during those three weeks. I've not known when they are gonna come in.

Here, it's not only the event of observation itself but also the period leading up to it that holds significance. The waiting period, often spanning several weeks prior to the inspection, is also dominated by discussions centred on regulating standards. This time frame influences her thoughts regarding her position, role, and function within the social and professional context. After three weeks, Jemima's newfound 'joy and enthusiasm' are the direct result of a process in which her teaching self was reaffirmed, allowing her to reclaim her space by expressing her agency. Finally, she can rewrite her own professional narrative by taking personal and professional risks in her daily practices, carving out opportunities to subvert the normative construction of her identity.

The difference between regular and performative practices is also evident in Arabella's account of how teaching materials need to be different in different situations. She said that she 'had to do a fake . . . not fake lesson but we have to do a fancy lesson with fancy materials'. Laura described the same phenomenon in a slightly more positive light. She said 'you can do it [design materials] by yourself if you manage to look at the criteria, understand the criteria, and you are able to make your own resources up to an excellent standard'. The redesign of teaching resources in an attempt to portray oneself as 'better' than one truly is arises from the desire to present an altered self deeply rooted in standards and norms, but often disconnected from the realities of their everyday context. Arabella and Laura undertake a process of self-reconstruction, driven by external demands that compel them to reshape their actions and redefine their identities. Their roles oscillate between that of reflective practitioners and agents of compliance, requiring them to continuously perform identity labour. The necessity to prove their ability to demonstrate what is commonly perceived as 'good teaching' through the creation of 'excellent' materials leads them to engage in the political action of dissensus highlighted in the difference between day-to-day pedagogy and their observed teaching practices. This political engagement is aimed at preserving the social recognition of their professional selves. Subsequently, they return to their usual practices, reconnecting with conditions that may not be that 'fake' or 'fancy'.

Frustration: a palimpsest of identity and relations

Frustration with repeated, meaningless observations and how aspects of practice are quantified was a common theme in our data, articulated here by Laura:

sometimes I get really frustrated that [an observed lesson] has to be so regimentally fine-tooth combed that it has to be stretched and kind of investigated and pulled apart in a way that's just like . . . leave us alone to do the job that we want to do. How many more times do I have to keep jumping from another hoop to validate my position my job?

The frustration resulting from such scrutiny ('hoops') stems from the necessity for educators to repeatedly perform their dis/placed professional identity. In this process, they are compelled to maintain the fundamental characteristics of their everyday teaching while simultaneously refining specific elements to align with established standards. Consequently, educators find themselves navigating two distinct spheres, each associated with a distinct professional identity. This spatiality duality necessitates the manifestation of features within their perceived authentic selves that are incongruent with the pedagogical practices they are compelled to present for external scrutiny.

Hence, the frustration experienced by educators can be attributed to the inherent tension between their genuine teaching methods and the prescribed practices necessitated by external observation.

This tension between regular teaching practices and external expectations, as discussed above, directs attention to the dichotomy between ‘place’ and ‘non-place’. In both instances, there exists an ongoing negotiation between identity and the constructed facades necessitated by external influences, illustrating how individuals often engage with alternative images of themselves in places and non-place:

The first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like a palimpsest on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten. But non-places are the real measure of our time; one that could be quantified . . . so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself [sic]. (Augé 1995, p. 86)

Laura’s teaching approach and Arabella’s pedagogical method, which she describes as ‘fancy’, both tend to strip away the crucial elements of cultural and local significance. Consequently, the classroom serves as a dynamic arena where the intricate interplay of teacher identities continuously undergoes transformation. Both teaching practices coexist, exhibiting a fluctuating focus between conforming to global standards and catering to local educational needs. However, this regimentation implies an underlying sense of performance showcase, ultimately resulting in the dis/placement of both teaching and the teacher.

This quantification of classroom interactions stems from the understandable difficulty of exploring the intricate, enduring connections between curricula, students, teachers, and the socio-economic conditions of the local context. But it is also a source of frustration and stress which originates from observations themselves and, importantly, from the additional paperwork and administrative tasks that they entail:

[It is] that stress that’s more frustration actually really stress . . . stress for me comes around work life balance having so much paperwork so much planning . . . the stress is generally with admin . . . turn from actual teacher development into how to get all the admin done . . .

Dylan goes on to link his frustration to dissatisfaction with the job and low pay: ‘trying to cope with prices in London’ is all the harder when ‘all your hard work is not appreciated in monetary terms’. It seems as if he is constantly navigating a sterile and uniform inspection system that leaves little room for personal life outwith the workplace. The reference to ‘so much paperwork’ highlights tasks that teachers are required to perform and as a result they feel disconnected from the relationally meaningful, identity-forming aspects of their profession. It is an example of dis/placement and how seemingly meaningless administrative demands erode the sense of place and who they are. Along with the homogenisation of educational practices and standardisation of processes, the economic realities of their location contribute to the feeling of dissatisfaction and frustration engendered by the bureaucratic aspects of teaching.

A similar recurring theme around well-being emerged in Laura’s experience, albeit with a slightly different perspective, where observers displayed a noticeable lack of concern for the well-being of both teachers and students.

I don’t have issue with observers . . . who come from a teaching background. . . from the heart of education. Who actually comes with the concern and with the wellbeing for how the teachers and the students feel. What can we do to help them? What are we gonna do to make their lives easier or better? Or make this place a great place to work in? What are we doing for them? I don’t think I have ever been asked that, ever. We had the most brutal forms of formalities and quick change over [clicks fingers]. It does leave you grated because then you think how dare you pick on my teaching practice.

The notion of well-being, here, is integral to teaching but seemingly ignored by observation. Laura’s concern for the welfare of the students emphasises the dehumanising nature of the managerial system. The ‘brutal forms of formalities’ make her feel ‘grated’: alienated, devalued and dis/placed despite the emotional investment she has in her sense of place within the system.

Accountability

On this analysis, inspection policies use the language of quality to facilitate and rationalise a dis/placed experience, potentially leading to contextual alienation and disconnectedness with the local pedagogical culture (Naz, 2021; Ofsted, 2019). The emphasis on checking, compliance, measurement and accountability reduces the phenomenon of quality to quantifiable metrics and external assessments. From an Augean perspective, this emphasis on compliance and external judgement can be seen as creating ‘non-places’ within the educational context. It implies that the educational space is becoming divorced from its ostensible purpose of fostering meaningful teaching and learning relationships, historical context, and a sense of identity. In this context, we can see the tension between managers, inspectors, and teachers. The former emphasises the need for external judgement and accountability, while the latter express their frustration stemming from the risk of creating ‘non-places’ within the educational landscape.

In elucidating his encounter with a classroom observer, Dylan expounded upon the inherent challenges he and his students confront. These challenges stem from the necessity of modifying his pedagogical approach to align with specified criteria, thereby ensuring compliance with the evaluative benchmarks sought by an inspector.

If I was doing something as tricky as quadratic equations, . . . I would probably create some kind of card sort for that or some kind of group activity even though I personally believe, it's not the best way to teach quadratics so therefore you could argue they are losing out. Because in reality what would be better would be for me to stand there, explain to them and get them to work together on a few worked questions but that would not get me a grade 1 or an independent result in my observation because the questions would be – why have you not got done any assessment for learning? Why have you not got students working together collaboratively? And the argument is because we are doing a topic that doesn't lend itself to that. But I wouldn't put myself at that risk. I would imagine something, think of something and create something that was sort of all singing all dancing, even though I didn't believe in its merit really.

Here the pressure to conform to specific methods and strategies align with the criteria sought by an inspector. This pressure leads to a situation where the teacher feels compelled to create activities or adopt approaches that may not align with their personal beliefs about effective teaching. In doing so, the teacher is dis/placed in the sense that their practice loses a meaningful connection with their individual pedagogical preferences rooted in their local context. This disconnection stems from the gap between policies and practices, amplifying the dissonance between adhering to externally mandated methods such as assessment for learning and collaborative group work and their own belief in more effective teaching approaches. This tension results in a situation where the teacher believes that students are missing out on a more effective instructional approach. The analysis of these relations of conflicts draws attention to reconfigured teaching, the readjustment of the conditions of local pedagogy and the status of teachers' knowledge *which make classroom a non-place with compromised rules of conduct*.

Conclusion

The kinds of risk-averse practice discussed by Dylan exemplify the impact of non-place because they show how the performance of a prescribed pedagogy ‘removes the individual reference from [his] ideology’ by a process which limits one's freedom of experimentation (Augé, 1995, p. 114). This reluctance to take risks that deviate from the stated evaluation criteria stems from external pressures that limit knowledge, professional tools, and channels of pedagogical dissemination. The fear of not receiving a grade-1 label and the ominous ‘implications’ referred to above contributes to normalisation, conformity and the redefinition of the perceived veracity of a teacher's actions.

By dis/placing teaching from the local context, classroom observations of the supermodern era demand that teaching practice ‘all-singing-all-dancing’ routines that re/place educational merit with performance. This placelessness shifts the focus from meaningful learning experiences to

a simulacrum of compliant, prescribed practices, paradoxically compromising the quality of education provided. It illustrates *the demise of the genuine teacher self* in a modern classroom where the non-place pursuit of compliance erodes the identity, historicity, and relationality needed by any sense of authenticity.

The point is that tensions between day-to-day pedagogy and conformity, between substantive teaching and external assessment, highlight the intricate equilibrium that educators must navigate to preserve their professional identities. This is not to assume the failure of quality improvement policies in practice across different teaching sites. Instead, our research draws attention to the need for a nuanced understanding of the erosion of identity within the modern educational landscape. It calls for a critical *spatial* examination of how standardisation, observation methodologies, and accountability mechanisms affect teaching *in situ*. Our analysis extends an invitation to engage in the practice of reinterpretation, calling attention to the complex relational places of modern educational practices. Augé's work offers a framework for rethinking this loss of individual professional identity and the fragmented sense of self as aspects of supermodernity in education. The 'brutal forms of formalities' which dis/place practice as performance and indicate a dis/placed identity stem from the gap between who teachers are they and what they are expected to be.

Further critico-spatial inquiry is therefore warranted if we are to better understand how lifelong education acts as arbiter of identity. A non-place is not simply a set of prescriptive guidelines about the way the non-place is to be used (Augé, 1995, p. 101) but also a judge of identity. This is because non-space demands that users provide not just proof of identity, but also of innocence, just as any consumer does when paying for goods or services. Assumed guilty until proven otherwise, the user of educational non-places is 'always required to prove [their] innocence' by 'stamp[ing] the space of contemporary consumption with the sign of non-place' which creates 'neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude, and similitude' (Augé, 1995, pp. 102–103).

Notes


1. The debate about the precise nature of this 'moment' and its value as a critical concept is extensive and, arguably, dated (see for example, Bauman, 2003; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1999; Jameson, 1991; Latour & Porter, 1993; Sennett, 1998)
2. Needless to say, related enquiry extends well beyond IJLE, and much work specifically on teacher identity in FE echoes the issues mentioned above (e.g. Bathmaker, 2006; Bennett & Smith, 2018; Clow, 2001; Feather, 2010; Jephcote et al., 2008; Robson, 1998)
3. For further discussion and examples from professional practice, see for instance Beighton (2016)
4. Or, more properly, planes of interaction or consistency.
5. Exceptions include (Bertling, 2018; Nakagawa & Payne, 2017; Victoria, 2021)
6. Augé is known for his often semi-fictionalised writings, including 'An Anthropology for Contemporaneous Worlds' (1998), 'In Praise of the Bicycle' (2008), and 'Everyone Dies Young: Time Without Age' (2016). Augé returns to the necessity and feasibility of reclaiming urban spaces from the alienating influences and structures that have, under the influence of supermodernity, drained them of their vitality.
7. This helps explain why issue of grading has attracted so much attention in the UK following the suicide of a school leader in the wake of such labelling (BBC, 2023).
8. The identities of all participants have been anonymised for confidentiality purposes.
9. Petty and Dweck are well-known names in the English FE sector and are currently widely referred to for instance on FE training and professional development programmes. This use of names to represent extensive bodies of work would doubtless be questioned by the authors themselves.
10. We prefer the term identity *labour* to the more common identity *work* because it underscores identity's role as a producer of economic use-value. In any case, the term denotes a further form of performativity, this time of that most marketable of educational commodities, the self.

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