

Engaging Pedagogies and Facilitating Pedagogues: Communities of Practice Among Novice Online Tutors and Secondary Vocational Teachers At the Forefront of Systemic Tensions and Change

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Abstract

Much contemporary teachers' work is located at the interface of complex systems of policy and provision. That interface is increasingly the site of broader discursive tensions as change is enacted, with profound implications for individual classes and courses. If pedagogies are to be engaging in such a context, teachers need to be simultaneously facilitators and facilitated. Yet often those teachers are at both the forefront and the frontline of educational change, without sufficient ammunition in their armoury as they battle to enhance students' learning outcomes and find meaning in their work.

The paper illustrates this argument by reference to two cases of engaging pedagogies and facilitating pedagogues: graduate research students working as novice online tutors in a Masters management program; and experienced secondary teachers implementing new vocational education subjects for senior secondary students in schools in a Queensland regional community. Deploying the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 2000; Yamagata-Lynch, 2001), the paper traces some of the professional and personal challenges experienced by both groups of educators, as well as their respective strategies for making the pedagogies engaging for their students. They gain from these communities the support that is often absent from the systems that employ them.

Introduction

Educators' work is subject to ongoing and increasing complexity and intensification. This has profound implications for the ways in which their professional and personal identities are shaped. It is also implicated in the extent to which the institutions and systems for which they work construct enabling and facilitative and/or counterproductive and disempowering environments for the discharge of their responsibilities. Certainly the successful conduct of educational reform and innovation depends on individual educators and systems working 'in synch' rather than 'out of kilter' with each other.

This paper takes up this issue of the interplay between the individual and institutional dimensions of pedagogical work in relation to two sites of contemporary educational significance. One site is online education, and the crucial role played by novice online tutors in facilitating effective asynchronous communication and thereby implementing a form of pedagogy vital to the sustainability of the institution that employed them. The other site is postcompulsory education in secondary schools, and the vital work of classroom teachers and department heads in bringing into some kind of working alignment two different systems and traditions of educational provision and

assessment: 'academic' senior secondary leading to university entrance based on criterion-referenced assessment; and vocational education and training (VET) predicated on competency-based assessment.

The authors deploy the concept of communities of practice (CoPs) (Wenger, 2000; Yamagata-Lynch, 2001) as a means of tracing the respective and shared ways in which the novice online tutors and the secondary vocational teachers negotiate purposes and construct meanings in very different educational contexts. The two qualitative data sets are interrogated for what they demonstrate about the strategies employed by the two groups of educators to maximise learning outcomes for their students and professional sense-making and satisfaction for themselves. The authors argue that there is a fundamental nexus between the capacity of these teachers to enact pedagogies that are engaging and the extent to which they are facilitated as pedagogues by the systems at the forefront of whose tensions and change pressures they are positioned.

The paper consists of five sections:

- a literature review centred on online higher education and vocational education and training in schools in Australia
- a conceptual framework focused on CoPs
- the research design underpinning the two studies
- analysis of the collected data with reference to three selected features of CoPs
- implications for (re)conceptualising educators' work of individuals and institutions operating at the forefront of systemic tensions and change in terms of engaging pedagogies and facilitating pedagogues.

Literature Review

Online education in the Australian higher education sector

Maturation, expansion and turbulence have characterised online education in the Australian higher education sector over the past decade. Its introduction often coincided with times of instability and flux as Australian universities responded to: reduced operating budgets (a 40% loss between 1996 and 2002); massification of tertiary education (a 30% increase in student numbers in the same period); and a reduction in teaching-only staff by 8% (Zipin & Brennan, 2003).

During this turbulence, most universities embraced online education as an element of their strategic adaptations. Online education was congruent with a gamut of strategies, from pragmatic accommodation to inspirational pedagogy: a symbol of institutional currency (Taylor, 2001); a thoughtful response to identified weaknesses in traditional distance education offerings; an extension beyond the classroom with cross-institutional coursework; an income stream from the 'earner-learners'; and workplace and professional engagements strengthening the place of fieldwork experience in formal courses.

This Aladdin's cave of reasons to adopt online education arguably delayed institutional clarity (de Freitas & Oliver, 2005) and fuelled the contested nature of online education within universities (Centre for Educational Research and Innovation, 2005), leaving them ripe for external influence. The Australian government provided national teaching development grants (principally administered by CUTSD and AUTC) to encourage the exploration of the potential of 'technological enhancements'

(of which online education is a subset) to university teaching (Alexander, McKenzie, & Gissinger, 1998; Schofield & Olsen, 2000). Later it focused attention on academic staff development following Dearn, Fraser and Ryan's (2002) conclusion that the preparation of academics for teaching is highly variable and, in most cases, ineffective. There was an alarming mismatch of *laissez faire* pedagogue preparation at odds with government intentions and the research-based pedagogical advice. As early as the late 1990s, online pedagogues had access to practice-based treatises such as Chickering and Ehrmann's (1996) "Implementing the Seven Principles: Technology as Lever" and Paulsen's (1995), Salmon's (2000) and Collinson, Bonnie, Haavind and Tinker's (2000) moderators' roles).

'External' encouragement of staff development, institutions and individual academics raised 'local' pedagogical issues. Despite two thirds of academics already developing course materials incorporating new technologies (McInnis, 1999), there was significant unsupported or isolated practice occurring in universities. As in other western nations (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001), the proliferation of online education had been identified as a major contributor to changed work conditions and a source of stress or dissatisfaction within Australian academic communities. On the other hand, student satisfaction with online learning was emerging as a factor for reflective consideration. A high level of staff satisfaction appeared to be correlated with positive student experiences (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner., 2001). For many academics, this was cold comfort as universities embarked upon substantial restructuring, altering the foci of influence and leaving many academic staff feeling disempowered and uneasy about the encroachment of a managerialist style of governance (Curri, 2002; Gillespie, Walsh, Winefield, Dua, & Stough, 2001).

Nevertheless, the potential for pedagogical innovation was explored relatively early in the evolution of online education. On the one hand, there was a sense that the teaching environment was so well-suited to particular approaches that an appropriate pedagogy would flow naturally from simply inhabiting the space (Taylor, Lopez, & Quadrelli, 1996). By the turn of the century, such an expectation was increasingly presented as naïve (Barab, McKinster, & Scheckler, 2003; Bennett & Marsh, 2002; Flecknoe, 2002; Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, & Lopez-Torres, 2003; O'Neil, 2000; Ragan, 1999; Steeples, Jones, & Goodyear, 2002; Weaver, 2006).

Influential models of practice, including Garrison, Anderson and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry and Terry Mayes's (2001) model of student engagement, were derived from adult learning literature and aligned with organisational contexts.

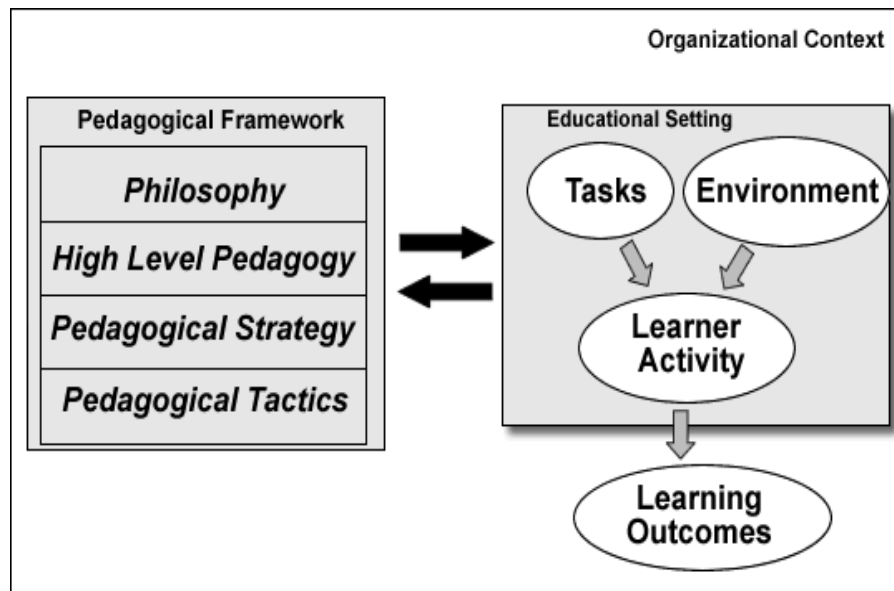


Figure 1: Pedagogy in context (adapted from Steeples, Jones, & Goodyear, 2002 by Kehrwald, Reushle, Redmond, Cleary, Albion, & Maroulis, 2005)

Figure 1 illustrates how the organisation sets the context for various online education communities. In this model, the educational setting is where the learning takes place (normally a combination of work and home as well as university for off-campus for study); the “environment” is often a learning management system supplemented by tools and resources pertinent to individual courses and/or programs. “Learning tasks” are designed by the pedagogue to elicit student learning, whereas “learner activity” is what learners actually do in response to these tasks. “Learning outcomes” are student products submitted for assessment of their achievements.

While there is general agreement that institutions have a role in developing the pedagogical skills of online facilitators, efficacious models remain under discussion. Models typically marry potentially relevant pedagogical tactics and strategies with an understanding of the facilitator’s contribution to student programs and embed these in institutional services and policies.

Vocational education and training in Australian schools

Vocational education and training in Australian schools have grown rapidly during the past few years. For example, in 2004 the Australian National Training Authority (2004-2005) noted that more than 95% of Australian secondary schools offered some form of VET and that the number of students participating in those programs had increased from about 60,000 in 1997 to 202,935 in 2003 (p. 5), and on the basis of this change claimed that “...*VET in Schools* has developed from a marginal activity to being an established part of all senior secondary school education” (p. 5; *emphasis in original*).

Despite this substantial shift in the provision of senior secondary schooling in Australia, several problems have attended the introduction of VET into that provision. For example, Taylor (2004-2005) evinced concern about the quality of some aspects of VET in schools, centred on three areas:

- the implementation of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF)

- the quality of workplace learning
- current and future program provision. (p. 8)

More broadly, Eckersley (2004-2005) noted that VET is one of the forms of educational provision charged with the responsibility of helping young people to negotiate a m(or)ass of competing pressures and challenging circumstances and of facilitating their capacity for resilience.

Some of these ebbs and flows of the potential and problems of VET in schools were incorporated into the summary by Kerry Bartlett, MP (Bartlett, 2004-2005) of the main elements of the Inquiry into Vocational Education in Schools conducted by the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Training (2004), of which he was a member. In particular, Bartlett identified a number of issues attending VET in schools that are taken up in the analysis below of the work and identities of selected VET teachers working in secondary schools in regional Queensland:

- “First is the need to raise the status of vocational education in schools, so that it is considered an integral part of the mainstream curriculum rather than an added extra or a second rate option for less capable students” (p. 35)
- “In effect, the growth in VET has been too ad hoc. It has not been matched by adequate planning, coordination or resources and has relied too heavily on the energy and commitment of a relatively small number of school leaders and teachers” (p. 35)
- “There is also the need to raise the status of a broader range of career options, including the traditional trades and those experiencing skill shortages” (p. 35)
- “*VET in Schools* must also be supported by adequate financial and human resources and practical support for the teachers and VET coordinators whose passion and dedication have driven its success in recent years” (p. 35; *emphasis in original*)
- “...there needs to be a more consistent national approach to...aspects such as the role of Structured Workplace Learning, the recognition of VET for tertiary entrance, the requirements regarding nominal hours and units of competency and the degree of embedding of VET in other courses versus stand alone VET courses” (p. 35).

What emerges from this summary of the Australian Commonwealth Government’s review into VET in schools is the intersection of several different and potentially competing forces and pressures, and the concomitant responsibility of VET teachers in secondary schools to try to manage that intersection so that it is as seamless as possible – that is, to promote engaging pedagogies as well as to be facilitating (and facilitated) pedagogues. This is no easy task, as the information below analysing the interview data with selected VET teachers demonstrates.

Conceptual Framework

The phenomenon of CoPs, groups of individuals working together to solve problems arising within a bounded domain of practice, is an appealing framework through which to examine the experiences of both groups of educators and the impact of their respective organisations on the development of pedagogical practice.

CoPs are premised upon collaborative engagement stimulating innovative solutions within the group, where members align their practice and develop professional

identities with other members of the group. Naturally occurring CoPs emerge at the intersection of three elements (only the first of which is examined in the data analysis): a domain (an area of focus for inquiry that requires both knowledge and practical competence); a community (individuals who intentionally interact in order to help one another develop, exploit and understand the domain); and shared practice (pooling and refining resources for tackling anticipated and recurring problems, resources and practices devised by members of the community) (Wenger, 2000; Yamagata-Lynch, 2001; see also Benzie, Mavers, Somekh & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2005).

Conceptions of CoPs have matured from earlier romanticised notions of steady state accord where knowledge and practices are perpetuated or refined – a harmony between practitioners and their professional or organisational systems. According to these notions, the steady state was assumed to be maintained as novices enter a professional community first to observe and absorb master practices (legitimate peripheral participation) and then to negotiate a more central position within the community as their practices and understandings align with the community norms (Østerlund & Carlile, 2005; Schwen & Hara, 2003). This increasing alignment between individuals and their organisation or profession underpinned early advocacy of CoPs as a model for induction and professional development in higher education – an apparently natural alignment founded upon collegiality (Sherer, Shea, & Kristensen, 2003; Trowler & Knight, 2000).

Instead, an environment of reform and innovation invites adaptation and challenge of practices. Within this landscape, CoPs are dynamic, reveal discord, evolve to respond to divergent futures, are focused on practice and retain substance with a fluid membership who have a life exceeding the achievement of pre-determined tasks (Barab, McKinster, & Scheckler, 2003).

The potential for dissonance, as well as alignment, between members and their organisation becomes apparent when one steps back to examine key characteristics of these communities, whereby they establish: (a) a sense of joint purpose where members rely on one another to achieve an outcome (interdependence); (b) mutuality, through an emerging set of norms and relationships; and (c) a shared repertoire, (language, resources, tools, etc.) which can be used to address recurring problems. Knowledge, solutions and practices can flow more readily within the CoP than seep through into the formal organisation where structures and boundaries (divisions of labour) ‘balkanise’ self-referencing organisational units. The newly developed, innovative practices strive to flourish despite the straitjacket of official, structural organisational units – the canonical worldview of practice (Østerlund & Carlile, 2005).

Research Design

The two projects reported in this paper were conducted independently of each other and were concerned with different research problems and questions, yet there was considerable commonality in their respective research designs. That commonality was centred on the fact that both projects:

- were situated within a qualitative research approach that was “multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998, p. 3)

- applied a case study method (Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1998; Stark & Torrance, 2005) that was ethnographic in character
- deployed an iterative relationship between data collection and analysis
- favoured notions of credibility, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to establish the strengths and potential limitations of their respective research designs through such means as triangulation of multiple data sources of evidence from the interviews and audit trails through ethical clearance documentation and interview transcripts
- pursued an interpretative approach to identifying and understanding meaningful action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2003; Merriam, 1998) in the two sites.

The specific details of data gathering for the two projects were as follows. The study of the novice online tutors focused on *AMan*, a multidisciplinary online Masters program in management at *Banksia*, the pseudonym for an Australian university (see also Cleary, 2006). The Postgraduate Academic Committee (PAC) overseeing *AMan* established *WebEase*, a CoP using the program's learning management system as the principal means of communication and hopefully of induction of the tutors. Data were collected from *WebEase* focus groups, semi-structured interviews with the administrators and e-tutors, CoP electronic transcripts, e-mails and PAC reports and minutes. Two anonymous student surveys preceded the *WebEase* focus groups. These surveys occurred each semester, initially between weeks three and four of a 13-week semester, then again at the end of the semester. Questions for the interviews and focus groups were derived in part from an analysis of earlier data collection sessions. Data were verified by member checking, triangulation through other sources or complementary data collections. Focusing on issues raised by the e-tutors was a strategy designed both to address issues in a timely and sensitive manner and to establish meaningful alignment with *Banksia* within the context of *WebEase* membership.

In addition to a statistical component that is not reported on here (see Harreveld, Kenny & Danaher, 2003), the study of VET in secondary schools conducted semi-structured interviews between April and July 2003 with 20 individuals in 10 sites in a regional Queensland community: five state high schools, the district education office, two organisations concerned with providing career and skills training to young people and two local businesses that provided work experience and school-based apprenticeships. (The subset of data drawn on for this paper composed more than 30,000 words of transcripts of seven interviews conducted by three interviewers with eight teachers in five state high schools.) The interview data were intended to address the following research question:

How do current delivery models for VET in these [participating] schools operate?

- (a) formal school/industry/work/community partnerships e.g. MOUs [Memoranda of Understanding]
- (b) formal networks e.g., memberships of community and industry specific committees
- (c) informal networks and partnerships via other routes
- (d) cross-sectoral collaborations e.g., non-state schools, VET sector training providers, universities
- (e) models for accessing VET educator expertise and the 'hard' infrastructures of plant and equipment. (Harreveld, Kenny & Danaher, 2003, p. 5)

For the purposes of this paper, the data collected from the two projects have also been analysed from the common perspective of the CoPs outlined above as the paper's conceptual framework. This analysis involved the following carefully formulated steps:

- a synthesis of the main elements of the concept of CoPs (elaborated above under the conceptual framework)
- the respective authors' re-interrogation (through focused content analysis) of the interview transcripts from the two projects in terms of a focused selection of those elements
- the identification of representative segments of selected transcripts that were seen as demonstrating one or more of those elements of CoPs in action
- communication and reflection among the authors about that identification
- final selection of data for reporting in the paper that were identified as being most 1) diverse 2) explicit and 3) representative in their portrayal of the CoP dimensions of the two project sites and in what they demonstrate about the online tutors' and VET teachers' engaging pedagogies and their status as facilitating and facilitated pedagogues.

Data Analysis

In keeping with the procedures outlined above underpinning the research design, the analysis of data from the two projects has been presented by means of the authors' representative selection of some of the principal identified elements of CoPs. The chosen interview data have been interwoven with those elements in an iterative way, whereby the data simultaneously serve to illustrate the selected elements of CoPs and also place those elements under challenge, by interrogating the character and relevance of each element in the context of the two studies reported here.

Collaborative engagement stimulating innovative solutions

As noted above, CoPs are premised upon collaborative engagement stimulating innovative solutions within the group, where members align their practice and develop professional identities with other members of the group. This implies active involvement and contribution, rather than passively receiving the fruits of others' labours. The innovators devise practices to achieve a 'better fit' between their activities and the present organisational structures, policies and practices.

Novice online tutors

Unexpectedly, novelty emerged as a key to devising solutions in response to the myriad of system annoyances that arose in the *AMan*'s first semester's offer. The *AMan* was administered by a newly formed School (*MGS*), whose Head had joined *Banksia* to assume the inaugural position. Furthermore, the tutors themselves were mostly ignorant of *Banksia*'s administrative and student support system. In the planning stages, it was anticipated that the tutors would liaise principally with their disciplinary colleagues in the faculties; however, employment by the *MGS* separated the tutors from this traditional support.

I agreed to take this class because [the Dean] asked. It is the new thing. For my CV...I thought "a foothold" – something stable....Geoff wrote the course but doesn't want to teach it, so no competition here. However, nobody [in the faculty] knows, nobody is even interested! A dead-end. I'm on my own. Even the Office can't help. (Tutor D)

Frustrations about opaque systems were vented: “When things go wrong, you go round in circles trying to find someone in *Banksia* who can help” (Tutor A). Instead the School itself, an outsider and small in organisational terms, was keen to succeed and therefore attentive. Through its Head and administrator, the School sought to devise tactical, workable solutions rather than simply understand *Banksia*’s systems and policies:

I walk the forms across to the Faculty, back to Student Admin, across to the Library, back to Student Admin...then I do my bit. You know, forms can sit on someone’s desk for weeks. After [an applicant’s] e-mail, [the Head of *MGS*] went on the warpath following the trail until he found the application. Sent a rocket! We’ve offered a free semester’s study. [The Head] reckons cheap solution, a satisfied and potentially loyal, though wary, customer. They [*Banksia*] just don’t know how to do things – so much red-tape. (Administrator 1)

In their enthusiasm, the *MGS* is also the source of some problems:

MGS’ fast-tracking late enrollees into the course. Students are in the course before receiving the introductory course materials and well before they have access to the library. We are the ones that make it work – spend lots of time one-on-one and e-mailing readings. (Tutor G)

Tutors came to rely on the School – “In the class I joke about re-structuring the groups as another student joins us” (Tutor G) – after initial frustrations: “I don’t know the students are coming. They just ‘pop into’ the course and I arrange introductions, quickly integrating them into the class” (Tutor G).

Secondary VET teachers

Although none of the eight teachers interviewed for the project reported here used the words “innovation” or “innovator”, all of them in different ways portrayed their work as challenging the *status quo* in order to address the particular needs of large numbers of students who would previously have left school at the end of Year 10. No doubt this was due in large measure to the roles that they occupied, ranging from heads of department of various subject areas (mostly connected with VET) to heads of senior schooling to coordinators of programs such as work experience and workplace learning. These roles required active and ongoing liaison with both colleagues in school and industry representatives outside the school, whereas most of their colleagues’ work was focused heavily within the school.

As an illustration of this challenging of the *status quo*, according to one teacher:

A lot of these kids don’t fit into the systems that we’ve got for them, so what we’re trying to do is perhaps try to overlay another system on the one that’s already existing which hasn’t fitted their box, their world... (Teacher 2)

Likewise another teacher saw the process as one of inverting the current situation:

...we’d have a student and we would try and find a program that suited that student, not have a program and then try and find the students to fit it. You understand what I mean? We go the other way. (Teacher 7)

Another teacher provided a specific example of lobbying curriculum designers in the head office in metropolitan Brisbane to bring about changes to a training package to articulate with and take advantage of local contexts and conditions:

The training packages are all nominated in Brisbane, so the first training package, perhaps, not a word about the Great Barrier Reef, only one word about outback tourism. The latest version does include training for those areas. They had to be bullied and pushed, cajoled, dragged along to do it. They didn’t want to do it; they just did not want to be part of it because it’s all Brisbane orientated. (Teacher 8)

Domain requiring knowledge and practical competence

One of the key processes that bind a CoP together is having a specific domain as an area of focus for inquiry that requires both knowledge and practical competence to be demonstrated by its practitioners. This domain can vary from a particular form of educational provision or mode of teaching and learning to a specialised subject area to a certain type of clientele.

Novice online tutors

While the *AMan* tutors anticipated that working in an online environment would be their significant pedagogical hurdle, bringing ‘management’ alive as a cohesive discipline emerged as an unexpected on-the-fly challenge.

I want to re-write much of the course as it is written as if the students want to be an accountant, and have the discipline to work at their own pace. I've had no assignments yet and fear the worst. This makes it very time-consuming as I have to deal with everyone individually. (Tutor I)

The program drew upon contributory elements of current *Banksia* courses; however, the writers had not grappled with ‘management’ – instead they wrote introductory versions of specialist majors.

I saw the course outline for 501 which had just been up-dated for the on-campus students. No wonder my students are having trouble! Only minor differences from “my” course – weeks not modules, less assessment with due dates paced through the semester...and they have a video exercise. (Tutor D)

Sustaining engagement with students emerged as a major pedagogical challenge and dilemma. Initially the tutors tentatively ‘opened up’ by sharing what were seen as unrealistic expectations set by the *MGS*, and at odds with student expectations. These conversations changed course to share what they had found to be fruitful strategies, and later invitations were sent to other tutors to visit their courses to see how those tactics bore fruit.

Secondary VET teachers

For the secondary VET teachers, the domain framing their CoP was the subjects making up the VET offerings in different schools’ senior secondary educational provision. These offerings were a complex mix of different assessment systems, with units of competency being embedded in some subjects and ‘stand alone’ options in others, and with sometimes rigorous human and physical resource requirements (including regular professional development for teachers in some subjects). This combination of knowledge and practical competence was seen as very different from the more ‘conventional’ subjects leading to eligibility for university entrance.

As noted above, the paper’s data analysis relating to the secondary VET teachers articulates directly with some of the issues identified by Kerry Bartlett, MP (Bartlett, 2004-2005) as needing to be resolved in secondary VET is to achieve its full potential in Australian education. The domain focusing the teachers’ CoP links with the first of those issues: “First is the need to raise the status of vocational education in schools, so that it is considered an integral part of the mainstream curriculum rather than an added extra or a second rate option for less capable students” (p. 35).

For the teachers interviewed for the project reported here, VET in schools was indeed “an integral part of the mainstream curriculum”, and it was this that constituted their professional domain. At the same time, many of them expressed concern that not all

teachers and students shared their view, and the (mis)conception of secondary VET as “a second rate option for less capable students” was reported by some teachers.

For example, according to Teacher 2:

I’ve tried to kick that off to try and get an ethos across of a...[local]cluster that kids that have come out of our schools with a voc[ational]. ed[ucation]. mentality will have skills and attitudes that will get them working and keep them working. Trying to have that local flavour, trying to keep kids here, trying to develop the idea that voc. ed. is not just a grubby manual arts subject that kids really do because they can’t handle real school. It is a pathway there if they’re prepared to take it, and there is a definite good quality [inaudible] to take those subjects. So that’s why I’ve tried to drag voc. ed. out of where it used to be. You used to hear some tin bashing [inaudible] whereas it’s a lot wider than that.

Similarly Teacher 3 mused, not entirely rhetorically:

Although I wonder, if we had 10 kids who were doing a straight traditional science high-flyer type course, and they suddenly came to us and said, “We want to do a traineeship in something”, maybe not a hands on thing, but maybe medical science, maybe something specific, something along those lines, whether teachers would say, “Hang on, I need them for Maths B; they can’t go”. There’s that dichotomy of “These are the subjects that are important at school level to get an O[verall] P[rofile, the Queensland university entrance score for schoolleavers] and go to university, but hang on, I want to do this as well because I think it’s an important part of my training”. I wonder how many teachers would be receptive to that. I think it’s okay while they’re the special ed[ucation]. kids or the unit kids; they would welcome that. If they [inaudible] their skills, they need them, but they’re not going to get a regular job. This is terrible, but those perceptions – you know what I mean. So they’re quite happy to let those sort[s] of kids, the under-achieving kids, fine, but once you get to kids who might be going to get in the 10+ OP, do you think they’d have the same attitude?

This determination to value the domain of secondary VET – often against the background of a perceived incomprehension if not antagonism from other teachers – articulated also with the third issue identified by Bartlett (2004-2005): “There is also the need to raise the status of a broader range of career options, including the traditional trades and those experiencing skill shortages” (p. 35). In response to this issue, Teacher 2 referred to “The whole world of work, in particular retail, for instance. I don’t think it’s valued anywhere near enough”.

Likewise Teacher 4 lamented:

That’s what I see in students. They have this conception that people have that you’ve got to do OP subjects, you’ve got to come out the other end and go to uni. For example, I’ve had one young guy came to me, a Grade 11 boy, and he said, “I’m doing Maths [?]. I’m failing. If I quit, will I still get an apprenticeship as a mechanic?”. I said, “Of course you will”. What’s happening is the parents are getting this whole misconception that the students have to get this high level. What he wants to do, he doesn’t need to be doing the subjects that he’s doing, they’re not suited for what he wants to be doing.

Dynamism, discord and responsiveness to divergent futures

As noted above in the conceptual framework, rather than existing unchanged in a steady state of ‘happy families’, CoPs are dynamic, reveal discord and tensions and evolve in response to divergent situations and futures. Furthermore, their membership is often fluid and has a life exceeding the achievement of pre-determined tasks.

Novice online tutors

Tutor presence and student engagement emerged on numerous occasions through the semester as a seat of disquiet. There were three parties in the courses: the tutor, the students and the MGS Marketer. The latter’s presence was an off-shoot of the School conceptualising the *AMan* as a commercial venture – students were

‘customers’ or ‘clients’. The marketer’s active presence in the class and interactions with tutors were at odds with tutor expectations: “The *MGS* does not respect the privacy of the learning environment nor consider the impact of their intrusion. Everyone (students and staff) is now careful about what they say – they don’t know who is ‘listening’” (Tutor D).

[Marketer] makes announcements in the course without consulting. They are lengthy, unrelated to the course....I am careful in my tone, how I present myself through friendly, relaxed, brief, focused announcements....I make lots of announcements, two or three a day if I have something to share with the class. Each is on a different topic so students can easily skip over if it isn’t relevant. On most occasions there is something new each time a student visits. (Tutor A)

...as were his interactions with the tutors: “[Marketer] is on my case because of the lack of action in the course site. The course site is like a graveyard. It [action] happens elsewhere, via e-mail and phone...” (Tutor D). Similarly, “[Marketer] sees himself as my supervisor in the course – that he has the right to interfere in my academic duties” (Tutor I).

Tutors felt that the Head of *MGS* displayed a lack of appreciation of their workload: “[Head] thinks we only answer questions about assignments. He keeps adding students which disrupts the teaching – discussions, group work etc” (Tutor G). “[Head] misses the point [that students are ringing the tutor at her home], suggesting that I don’t answer the phone...and keep a record of the phone calls I make so I can be reimbursed...” (Tutor I). “Terse e-mail from [Head]. I had told the class that I would not be available when I went to China. He expects me to respond to student enquiries” (Tutor D).

Lack of protocols provided a malleable space for cooperation. The *MGS* was seeking to establish its own processes and had not yet formed a pattern of interaction with the rest of the university. By the end of the first semester, the School used its collated data to liaise with *Banksia* administrative and library staff to hammer out a less eclectic practice. This initiative was welcomed by some regular *Banksia* staff, though mostly the expectation was that the *MGS* would be fine if they ‘read the manual’: “I wish they would ask...treat us like professionals. There’s lots we can do. It’s so frustrating ‘cause we have to sit on our hands. We can’t just offer” (*Banksia* Administrator 1).

Secondary VET teachers

On the one hand, several of the secondary VET teachers spoke about the professional and personal relationships that they had developed over many years in the local community as being the basis for the secondary VET networks to which they contributed. These relationships included associations with other teachers (in the same and different schools), school administrators, other specialist teachers, parents, former students, providers of other community services and employers. These variegated associations constituted a rich tapestry of connections and social capital that the teachers were able to use as the basis for dynamic and fluid membership of this particular CoP.

With regard to the potential sources of discord and tensions, one related – not surprisingly – to resources. For example, Teacher 6 preferred to develop resources within the school’s immediate community (such as adjacent industries and former students) than to share resources with other schools in the wider community of the

town and the surrounding district, believing that that strategy made more sense in the particular context of his school's community.

There was also a feeling that 'not all secondary VET programs were created equally', with the consequence that schools with fewer students and hence a smaller range of programs were considered not to be able to contribute to the 'resource pool' as much as larger schools. This fed concern that the programs at some schools were so small that they might not be viable in the future.

A third area of potential discord lay in the school–industry interface, encapsulated in the comment by Teacher 6 that "there is a real training industry culture of 'We want to make money'". That is, schools and businesses have fundamentally different *raison d'être*, with schools concerned for students' learning and welfare and industry seeing students as prospective workers contributing to their 'bottom line'. This is one example of the multiple intersecting spheres of influence sometimes leading to different and potentially conflicting expectations.

These instances of possible discord and tensions articulate with the fifth issue identified by Bartlett (2004-2005) in his overview of VET in Australian schools:

...there needs to be a more consistent national approach to...aspects such as the role of Structured Workplace Learning, the recognition of VET for tertiary entrance, the requirements regarding nominal hours and units of competency and the degree of embedding of VET in other courses versus stand alone VET courses. (p. 35)

All these items reflected VET's position at the intersection between schools and other agencies (such as the AQTF and universities) and, while that intersection presents opportunities for networks and partnerships, it also contains the seeds of potential misunderstanding and role conflict, which in turn feeds into the secondary VET teachers' CoP, rendering it dynamic and fluid rather than permanent and unchanging.

Implications for Educators' Work

The preceding data analysis has used the concept of CoP – particularly the notions of domain and dynamism, discord and responsiveness to divergent futures – to interrogate some of the professional and personal challenges experienced by both the novice online tutors and the secondary VET teachers as they discharged their responsibilities. It has also identified a number of the strategies that they used to make their pedagogies engaging for their students and thereby to be both facilitating and facilitated in their roles as pedagogues.

The paper's focus on 'engaging pedagogies' has been addressed by highlighting the ongoing efforts by the two groups of educators to create stimulating and meaningful learning environments, despite the sometimes difficult circumstances in which they discharged their responsibilities. For example, the instances of innovative practice reflected a commitment to finding new ways of connecting with students' interests and lifeworlds, either within or outside existing structures and systems. Likewise the educators' respective domains – online education and secondary vocational education and training – presented them with what they perceived as both distinctive challenges and opportunities in meeting their students' expectations in ways that were different from those of other domains. This evokes a situated and contingent understanding of 'engaging pedagogies' – that such pedagogies are firmly located in the 'here and now'

of specific practices located in particular contexts being directed at meeting the needs and motivating the interests of certain groups of learners – of individual communities of practice, in fact.

Similarly the paper's focus on 'facilitating pedagogues' was demonstrated starkly by the recurring influence of the 'macro' level of the aforementioned structures and systems on the effectiveness of those 'engaging pedagogies'. That is, the data reveal time and again that these two domains are contested sites of educational provision and that educational organisations are often found wanting with regard to providing the optimum level of resources and other dimensions of working environments in which such pedagogies are enacted. This was portrayed clearly in the discussion of the capacity of the two communities of practice for responding to dynamism, discord and divergent futures: the multiple stakeholders with ambiguous lines of communication and responsibility and sometimes competing expectations and interests sometimes provided sources of inspiration and support and at other times created problems rather than solutions for both groups of educators. Certainly there was a significant line of demarcation of those pedagogues who considered that they were facilitated and those who felt themselves to be abandoned and to enacting their engaging pedagogies despite, not because of, other stakeholders.

The paper turns now to consider some of the wider implications of the data analysis above for understanding contemporary issues in educators' work against a backdrop of systemic tensions and change. Those implications are encapsulated in the military metaphor outlined in the abstract of this paper. Conceptualising the work of the tutors and the teachers as being at the forefront and the frontline of educational change, often with insufficient ammunition in their armoury as they do battle to enhance students' learning and to derive meaning from their teaching, serves to highlight the ethical and political dimensions of both CoPs and contemporary educational work. The terrain of those dimensions is uneven and uneasy, with rocky outcrops of challenge and occasional oases of fulfilment. CoPs constitute one set of strategies for educators to render that terrain somewhat more hospitable for their students and themselves.

It is clear from the preceding analysis that, at the interface between systems' policies and the practices of those who are charged with the implementation of these policies, there are particular pedagogical approaches that educators need to (a) know about and (b) be able to apply and enact. Given the argument being prosecuted in this paper, this is where and why CoPs become important: they provide a level of support for that application and enactment that is often absent from the systems that initiate much of the change and that depend for their own survival and sustainability on the efficient discharge of the educators' work responsibilities.

From this perspective, CoPs can be seen as sites of ambivalence in relation to educators' work. On the one hand, they are generally regarded by their members as havens or refuges where flagging spirits can be restored and enthusiasms can be recharged. On the other hand, they are sometimes considered by administrators and managers to be capable of, and responsible for, achieving what are often widely ranging and unrealistic expectations.

Conclusion

The work of contemporary educators is discharged across an enormous array of settings and sites and is subject to a broad range of pervasive and often contradictory forces. There is therefore a fundamental nexus between the capacity of these educators to enact pedagogies that are engaging and the extent to which they are facilitated as pedagogues by the systems at the forefront of whose tensions and change pressures they are positioned.

This is certainly the case with the two groups of educators whose working lives have been portrayed in this paper. Despite varying widely in level of experience, location, mode of delivery and sector, they experienced in common the interplay of multiple imperatives from several sources: their students, their colleagues, their administrators and managers, their communities and the various bodies charged with certifying the qualifications that they were helping their students to attain. As they struggled to maximise their students' learning outcomes and their own sense of purpose and fulfilment, they sought assistance wherever they could find it – within themselves, through collegial and professional interactions with their colleagues and through liaison with and lobbying of those who had access to the resources that they needed to enact their responsibilities effectively.

The concept of CoPs has been helpful in understanding how both groups of educators drew on such elements of that concept as domain and dynamism, discord and responsiveness to divergent futures to 'do' their work in contexts of systemic tensions and change. The question of why they needed to do so is equally significant: this highlights the particular challenges and opportunities that occur when educators' work is carried out in 'boundary sites' (Danaher, Moran & Harreveld, 1995) where policy and practice are contentious and unstable. In combination, this 'how' and 'why' of these educators' work demonstrate the sheer complexity and degree of difficulty attendant on 'engaging pedagogies' and the concomitant necessity for 'facilitating pedagogues' if this work is to be effective, efficient and equitable.

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