LIFELONG LEARNING IN THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATION WORKPLACE: IMPLICATIONS OF A DISTANCE VOCATIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on the learning experiences of students in a distance vocational teacher education program at Central Queensland University. Pen pictures of two students are used to generate reflections on developing a VET lifelong learning community. The paper considers implications of those reflections for theorising lifelong learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Changing economic and employment patterns associated with fast capitalism and globalisation have seen large numbers of industry qualified workers searching for more secure jobs. Many of them have identified teaching as a profession enabling them to share their specialised knowledges and skills in the formalised learning contexts of secondary schools and registered training organizations. Yet this move has been far from easy and is fraught with dilemmas and potential risks. Debate continues, for example, about the eventual outcomes of school based vocational education and whether the rhetoric about 'multiple pathways for students' disguises the reality of steadily reduced employment options.

Many of these dilemmas and risks are evident in the experiences of students with prior industry qualifications and experience who are enrolled in the distance Secondary Vocational Education and Training (Secondary/VET) teacher education program provided by the Faculty of Education and Creative Arts at Central Queensland University (CQU). These students' prior qualifications and experience provide them with the discipline-specific content knowledge of their first teaching area, and their undergraduate pathway offers advanced standing (exemption from the first year of study) in recognition of this. This pathway also requires students to study a second discipline-specific teaching area, thus making graduates attractive to potential employers in both the schools and the VET systems. 2002 has seen the introduction of the Bachelor of Learning Management (Secondary Vocational Education and Training) degree. This degree combines the Faculty's earlier VET qualifications in a single 'nested' award with undergraduate and graduate entry pathways and two exit points (according to which sector(s) – secondary and/or VET – the students wish to enter as prospective teachers). The program providers deploy many contemporary communication technologies in its design and delivery (Harreveld, 1999), as well as other features intended to foster a sense of shared identity (these are discussed in the second section of the paper).

This paper consists of three sections:

- pen pictures of two students created to display the diversity of dilemmas and risks experienced by the many adults who choose to learn via this program,
- reflections on developing a lifelong learning community from the program,
- implications for theorising lifelong learning.

The focus is on the linguistic, cultural, and marginalising dimensions of lifelong learning considered from both an empirical and a conceptual standpoint, and the consequences of those dimensions for constructing a lifelong learning community. The 'workplace' of the paper's title refers to the wide variety of teaching, tutoring, and training sites in which the Secondary/VET students and graduates are situated; it is against the background of these workplace sites that the posited VET lifelong learning community needs to be understood and instantiated.

PEN PICTURES

These pen pictures are composites condensed by the authors from written and oral communications from students enrolled in the Secondary/VET program. They are intended to encapsulate these students' widely ranging experiences and aspirations, but the authors' perceptions and professional concerns (and the need to condense the accounts for this paper) give specific focus to the presentation here.

Mary Beth

Mary Beth is a twenty-four year old chef. She completed her apprenticeship at three different catering establishments in the provincial town in which she lives. Her parents actually bought an already well established restaurant so that both she and her big brother, who is also a chef, would not have to leave their home town to seek permanent work. Her brother is now married with children of his own. Mary Beth does not see a future for herself in the family business because at the moment she is pulling all the late and early shifts, and is always on call if other staff do not turn up. On the other hand, her brother is taking the best shifts because he claims he needs them to fit in with his increased family responsibilities with two young children. Her parents seem to expect her to be always on hand to help out. They are extremely sceptical of the new competency-based training system that has been brought into the hospitality industry. They were never really impressed with the quality of training offered at the college because they believed the best training was in the real world, on the job. Nor did they believe that it was their problem as employers to have to cover the cost of replacement staff when their apprentices went to college. Her father has been a member of the local industry training advisory board's committee for the last five years. He has made these opinions quite well known to other people in the hospitality industry, including college teachers. In addition, however, he strongly disapproves of the new competency-based training that has been brought in, while approving of its increased facility for total on-the-job training.

Mary Beth wants to build another career for herself that gives her wider options. Teaching had always interested her, especially teaching in her own trade area of hospitality. She had always thought how good a job the teachers at the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) college had when she came in for her block training when she was an apprentice. It seemed to be worthwhile to enrol in a teacher training program that could qualify her to be able to teach others about her work. This area of teaching was preferred because she remembered from her own apprenticeship days how she and her mates really wanted to be at college on their block releases. For students enrolled in prevocational courses, Mary Beth believed that the enjoyment for her as a teacher would come from encouraging and even inspiring them to want to become chefs.

In her reflective journal notes from her first teaching practicum, she recorded that she could not believe that the students were not in the slightest bit interested in her current and relevant industry knowledge and experience when she referred to it in class. By the end of the second lesson she realised that it was more important that she get to know these students, because they certainly were not interested in getting to know her. She had already figured out that this was necessary if she was going to be able to teach them anything. Her lesson planning then had to change to reflect this, because while she had previously meticulously planned each lesson, the students didn't seem to be paying attention. While in the apprenticeship classes the students had to turn up, the same could not be said for the prevocational (prevoc) classes because some would just come and go as they pleased. Both groups of students were quite undisciplined, with some chatting throughout whole lessons and simply not doing any work at all, or at best putting in a minimal effort. In the prevoc classes it was sometimes quite dangerous because they would not pay attention to the detailed briefings and demonstrations given beforehand. While lamenting that this would have never happened when she was an apprentice, she decided that she really did still want to be a teacher, but she'd have to learn how to teach these students so that they could and would learn.

Darren

The cold winds of redundancy hit Darren's world towards the end of last year. Life for information technology specialists was always precarious but the money was great. Now it seems that if he is willing to go to a big city then he can join the queues of other IT specialists in his area of expertise scrambling for positions with the ever-diminishing number of solvent companies. However, his partner's got a good job in the office at the local old people's home and there's family and friends close by as well. The redundancy money has paid out the

mortgage and loan for the extensions on the house. One of the next door neighbours is a head of department down at the local high school and he said they are desperate for IT people with industry experience. The neighbour across the road works for a local training provider and while Darren was helping him install his computer he'd told him that they were looking for people who could teach the new IT competencies used in workplaces these days.

The local university has a campus in town and it seems that it's possible to do teacher education that'll cover both worlds – the world of industry training and the world of high schools. Darren chooses this option because after his recent experiences, he doesn't want to get caught again. Teaching's a good safe profession – people are always having kids and someone's got to teach them. It seems that if his partner's job stays stable for the next eighteen months they could survive on one wage for that time. This means that he'd have to fast track his studies because they reckon that it takes two years to be a teacher if you've already got a degree. He thought he'd try them out for a shorter study program because he's got one degree and a half a masters, but they wouldn't budge, citing the Board of Teacher Registration requirements for teaching in Queensland. So, sixteen subjects to do and that's it.

The study load is to be expected, but those education lecturers do carry on about the most idiotic things like lesson plans, unit plans and what they call curriculum. If they just had to get in and do it, like Darren's had to do with his staff for the last ten years, then maybe they'd know what real teaching and learning's all about. The first prac is coming up and he's not about to tell them that the nightmares and upset stomach have started. His biggest fear at school was having to stand out the front of the class and talk. On top of that, he wouldn't have a clue how to talk to teenagers. With no children of his own, the only thing Darren's got to go on is the behaviour of his nieces and nephews and if it were up to him they would've had a good clip under the ear years ago just for the way they talk to their parents alone. They reckon that some of those unemployed people who come to the adult classes are just there so they can collect their dole money. They're mainly older teenagers and people in their twenties who've never done a day's work in their life. It'll be OK though, he can do it – he has to be able to do it.

These pen pictures illustrate the following aspects of lifelong learning for these adult students:

- adults have to learn so as to earn;
- adults have their own ideas about the profession(s) they have chosen to enter;
- learning options and pathways that lead to recognised portable qualifications are necessary;
- for adults entering the teaching profession, it is challenging to be both a learner and a teacher at the same time;
- responding to changes in student behaviours, designed curriculum, and learning modes poses unforseen dilemmas;
- as learners, adults are comfortable with previous learned knowledges and skills yet have to confront the risks of learning new knowledges and skills.

DEVELOPING A VOCATIONAL EDUCATION WORKPLACE LIFELONG LEARNING COMMUNITY

These pen pictures suggest several points about the project of building and sustaining a vocational education workplace lifelong learning community. Clearly, such a community extends far and wide and involves a large number of participants with multiple and varied responsibilities. Our focus here is on the elements of the lifelong learning community relevant to the Secondary/VET program at CQU; the perspective adopted is that of the staff members.

The dilemmas facing Secondary/VET students as illustrated in the pen pictures highlight two key issues relating to building lifelong learning communities. These are *discourse(s)* and *culture*. This commentary highlights how they arise in the VET training domain; these are the core concepts we will consider in the theoretical section also.

On the basis of the pen pictures, we contend that one key competency of a lifelong learner is the capacity to deploy a range of discourses appropriate to context, because as Gee (1996a, 1996b, 1997) noted:

> "When we write or read, speak or listen, we coordinate and are coordinated by specific identities, specific ways of using language, various objects, tools, technologies, sites and institutions as well as other people's minds and bodies" (Gee, 1996a, p. 6).

Indeed, language is an element of the program that has received careful and sustained attention because it is crucial for building a community of learners who can cross the school and VET systems' borders of power and control as recognised educators. Foucault's (1972, 1977) understanding of the construction of power is being used here because it engages with the role of language that is central to the construction and negotiation of social meanings and relationships among people positioned as both adult learners and teachers-in-training. The positioning of these adults as learners and teachers is governed by the respective systems of a university institution, schools, and registered training organizations, while it is also constrained by the limits set by each system's closure. However, at the same time, there are other discourses that are mobilised by these adults as learners – discourses through which they position their practices of learning and teaching differently. These discourses enable them to exchange meaning at specific sites such that those sites are recognisable as instances of particular social relationships.

Specific courses (subjects) are used as sites in which discourse meanings are explicitly explored. Three such courses, Language for Learning, Teaching Curriculum Literacies and Adult Literacy and Numeracy at Work, continue this focus. Yet it is accurate to say that all courses in the program engage in some way with the terminology considered appropriate to use in relation to the respective aspects of curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment within their new worlds of work. This focus on language contributes to the development of a Secondary/VET lifelong learning community, wherein a particular feature of this community is the multi-discoursal language of its members.

Another key aspect of a community is culture. While this term means many things to different people, in this context it might be taken as referring to an acknowledgment of certain common attributes that sets a group apart from others. The Secondary/VET program is the only preservice teacher education program at CQU offered in the distance mode (a point that is taken up below). Another distinctive feature is a perception by at least some Secondary/VET students that VET is a devalued and marginalised educational sector in comparison with 'academic' or 'general' education. This in turn generates a heightened determination not only to provide high quality learning experiences for them, but also to embed processes designed to highlight the cultural dimension of this community of adults as learners.

These processes are particularly important in a context where the program is offered in a distance or external mode. While we do not assume that face-to-face learning is automatically superior to studying in other forms, we recognise that there are special challenges in developing a sense of community among people who do not have regular physical contact with one another. The following strategies are used to address these challenges:

- a 5-day intensive set of Residential Workshops prior to the commencement of the academic year;
- weekly face-to-face Study Groups at three campuses;
- regular industry and school visits by university staff;
- a biannual physical meeting of the program's Industry Reference Group (including university staff members and local and regional representatives of schools, TAFE Colleges and industry;
- via the Industry Reference Group, a research strategy involving reference group members and their professional networks, as well as the students' and university staff members' professional networks;
- discipline specific professional development courses taught on-site in high schools under joint venture arrangements between the Faculty and each school. These courses are open not only to the Secondary/VET students but also to any teachers and trainers who might wish to participate;
- reciprocal cross credit arrangements for VET specific courses under a memorandum of understanding with TAFE Queensland;
- a biannual *VETlink* magazine that in 2002 will be produced by the students themselves;
- ongoing teletutorials, videoconferences, and Internet-based communications.

Evaluations of the above strategies to date have been both formal and informal. Each course is formally evaluated by the Population Research Laboratory at CQU. The Residential Workshops have been evaluated via questionnaire with the 2002 results currently being analysed prior to publication in a formal report. All joint ventures and memoranda of understanding are reviewed

on an annual basis with recommended changes reported in the formal minutes of the Industry Reference Group meetings, and communicated in writing via the Faculty and university committee structures. One particularly useful informal source of evaluative feedback comes from the wide dissemination of the *VETlink* magazine to current and past students, fieldwork supervisors, their employers, and Industry Reference Group members. All these actions are designed to promote a sense of unity and commonality of purpose among our adult learners as university students, which in turn is intended to foster the growth of a community of lifelong learners.

THEORISING LIFELONG LEARNING

What do the preceding pen pictures of Secondary/VET students, and the resultant reflections on building and sustaining a community of lifelong learners, suggest about theoretical understandings about lifelong learning? We have elected to restrict our theoretical commentary on this occasion to three concepts (language, culture and power), the first two suggested by the previous section of the paper, the other inspired by our shared interest in educational marginalisation. We shall argue that the Secondary/VET students' dilemmas regarding access to discourses and cultural capital contribute to their threatened marginalisation in the teaching profession, but that these dilemmas are far from being the only cause of this threatened marginalisation. These three disparate intellectual resources are linked by their assumed capacity to contribute fundamental theoretical understandings of lifelong learning communities in general and the CQU Secondary/VET community in particular.

Firstly, we discussed above the complex role of *language* in developing a lifelong learning community. We contend that language functions as a marker and an instrument of power, and that linguistic facility ensures that some individuals are recognised as community members while lack of such facility sets other individuals apart from that community. Similarly, the pen pictures illustrated how many Secondary/VET students find the multiple discourses associated with linguistic practices across different educational sites confusing and difficult to learn. Phillips (2001) usefully encapsulated this vital link among language, discourse and power.

> "Such discourses have the ability to authorize what can be said and/or thought, as well as who can speak, when and with what authority. Discourses compete with one another and often inflict varied demands and expectations on subjects" (p. 263).

The staff members have also experienced those "varied demands and expectations" exerted by discourses, and they see an important part of their role as helping to equip Secondary/VET students to learn and deploy the discourses confidently and effectively in their varied teaching contexts.

Phillips (2001) used the notions of 'secret', 'cover' and 'sacred' stories of teachers' professional lives to analyse her portraits of two preservice teachers. Drawing on the work of Clandinin & Connelly (1996), she outlined the nature of these story types.

> "Secret stories represent the stories a teacher lives out within the safety of his/her classroom. Cover stories are those a teacher tells to hide or disguise the secret practices of the classroom, while sacred stories are those imposed on teachers via governing authoritative bodies" (p. 261).

The reference to "within the safety of his/her classroom" is too cloistered and restricted to convey the multiplicity of workplaces in which Secondary/VET students and graduates operate. Like their colleagues who come straight from school or undergraduate studies into teacher education programs, the Secondary/VET students must engage with the new professional narratives that they must understand if they are to be considered effective practitioners. But their engagement with these new narratives intersects with and is shaped by the diversity of their educational workplaces, and of their prior life and professional experiences.

In the two pen pictures, Secondary/VET students try to manage the gap between their point-of-entry discursive skills and cultural assumptions on the one hand and the 'sacred' discourse(s) they must learn on the other. For practitioners, 'secret' or 'cover' discourses serve to distract from or bridge such gaps, so obvious in newcomers' accounts. We argue that accounts of such discourses could be considered a vital 'litmus test' for the general health of a lifelong learning community. The respective proportions of 'secret', 'cover' and 'sacred' stories provides a potential index of the relative well being or pathology of community members (as well as that of the writers of the 'sacred' stories). Such an approach would certainly attend to the fundamental links between language and power that we have emphasised in this paper.

Secondly, we referred above to the *cultural* dimension of a lifelong learning community. In the inaugural international lifelong conference proceedings, Grace (2000) explored some of the prerequisites to building an inclusive pedagogy within a lifelong learning community. In doing so, she concentrated on adult educational practice as a cultural practice, and she drew on Raymond Williams' (cited in Grossberg, 1997) distinction between culture as community and culture as knowledge. Grace contended that both these dimensions of culture are crucial to understanding how lifelong learning communities can be developed.

> "By taking up culture as community, we build popular knowledges associated with differences including work culture, customs, and community attachments. This helps us to interrogate social relationships formed, lived out, and represented in cultural spaces like workplaces. Like taking up culture as knowledge, we can come to terms with formalized knowledges with worth in the intersection of the economic and the cultural form" (p. 57).

As with language considered above,

> "This juxtaposition demonstrates the inextricable link between culture and power, and it indicates that culture is a site of struggle, where the relationship between culture and power is always changing" (p. 57).

We concur with Grace (2000) that theorising the cultural dimension of lifelong learning is integral to understanding why some groups of lifelong learners acquire the attributes of communities and others do not. We agree also that developing "an inclusive pedagogy of lifelong-learning community" (p. 54) is one potentially very fruitful result of such a process of theorisation. The Secondary/VET students' accounts portray an experience, not of inclusion, but rather of the threat of marginalisation.

Thirdly, there is the systems' positioning of these Secondary/VET students. The above theoretical approaches to language and culture share an acknowledgment of the centrality of *power* in each phenomenon. This is no mere coincidence: attending to the political dimension is essential in any effective theorisation of lifelong learning communities. We indicated earlier that, despite our diverse intellectual backgrounds and journeys, we have in common an interest in educational marginalisation. More particularly, we are concerned – in both senses of that word – by the ease with which formal educational provision can be complicit with strategies of marginalisation, at the same time that such provision can be the site of tactics of resistance of that marginalisation (de Certeau, 1984). This concern draws attention to the crucial links between education and power and therefore literally triangulates with the preceding accounts of how power suffuses language and culture.

Kell & Hill (1997) have taken up the idea of educational marginalisation in relation to the Australian VET sector. Specifically, they argued that the sector exhibits many of the features of what Arronwitz & Di Fazio (1995) have described "as the proletarianisation of the profession where skills and capabilities are degraded by the reorganisation of teachers' work structures" (p. 73). As Kell and Hill noted, this proletarianisation "is evident in diminished autonomy and the disconnection between design and execution in teachers' work" (p. 75). Of course it might be claimed that the evidence of proletarianisation can be seen in all educational sectors. Nevertheless we contend that the VET sector is particularly vulnerable to this process, as it is associated with work that has been systematically devalued and rendered obsolete by the onrush of fast capitalism and globalisation. Moreover, it would be ironic, even tragic, given the rationale for many VET students turning to teaching – the belief that it affords job security and status – if they were to find on entering the profession that it actually provides less autonomy and security than they had anticipated. The notion of proletarianisation is clearly a key element of the conceptual framework informing our interrogation of this particular lifelong learning community, and it accords very closely with our concern about the potential marginalisation of that community.

CONCLUSION

We conclude by emphasising (*pace* Phillips, 2001) the significance of the question of how healthy the powerful partners in the discourse – the gospel writers – actually are. This brings to the fore a set of related questions pertaining to how an institution engages with lifelong learners:

- Is the institution asking if the new gospels work? (if the 'sacred'–'secret' gap is of a tolerable width, this doesn't suggest mutually hostile value systems conflicting).
- Alternatively, is the institution being circumvented or reinterpreted to the point of meaning something quite different (with divergent 'secret' and 'cover' stories dominating). If so, what should the institution learn?

- Is there much evidence that the work that the students or practitioners are doing with this new language is actually contributing to its development? If feedback and dialogue are not in evidence, then one must ask if the institution's use of the language of the lifelong learning community is actually a strategy of entrapment. (If this strategy of entrapment is indeed in operation, Secondary/VET students, having already learned a gospel of relative values, whereby trades are ranked below professions and technical below academic knowledge, are in a weak position to identify and confront the real root of their unease with the new discourses that they encounter, and the work that these discourses do.)

Clearly, much further work in research and theorising lifelong learning communities in the vocational education workplaces of schools, businesses and industries is required. To return to a point that we made earlier, the theory of lifelong learning community is indeed potentially fruitful, but only if all the partners are in constant dialogue, and in a dialogue that is rooted and fed by a reciprocity between practice and theory.

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