VOCATIONAL TEACHER EDUCATION: BRIDGING THE TEACHING DIVIDE TOWARD LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores debates emerging in the VET sector around the impact of competency based approaches (and more recently training packages) on the capacity of VET to assist in developing lifelong learners. It considers debates around the assumed 'conventional' training paradigm of VET (that is focussed on task reproduction for work) and to what extent this is maturing into an appreciation of the need to cultivate capacity for ongoing learning in a rapidly changing vocational environment. A key issue in this debate is the mediating role of the VET teacher and their capacity to foster learning environments that are learner centred and focussed on building an ongoing individual capacity for lifelong learning. Specifically, the paper analyses a significant re-orientation of VET teacher education programs at a major TAFE provider, which sought to create a constructivist model for teacher education based on the Biggs' (1999) notion of constructive alignment and Brookfield's (1995) model of the critically reflective teacher. The underlying intent of this strategy was to enhance the capacity of VET teachers to adopt pedagogies that accelerated this move from a purely training paradigm to one focussed on (lifelong) learning. Though not without its challenges, this reorientation may provide useful insights into the process of building lifelong learning via VET teaching and learning.

INTRODUCTION

The Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector represents a critical and arguably unique intersection between the key influences on lifelong learning: formal education, the workplace and the broader community. As such, as Kearns (1999) observes, the VET sector has therefore a 'distinctive responsibility' to interconnect these environments to cultivate a vibrant and sustainable framework for lifelong learning. This implies a fundamentally important role for the teacher in VET - to cultivate in learners an appreciation of, and capacity for, lifelong learning practice. Kearns further identifies the four sustaining foundations of such lifelong learning practice as being:

- *'learning to learn skills*
- *motivation and desire for learning*
- *confidence to keep learning throughout life and*
- *personal mastery (as a basis for empowerment in work and in society)'*

(Kearns, 1999 p.11)

LIFELONG LEARNING AND THE VET SECTOR

However, it is evident that significant impediments limit the ability, motivation and capacity of VET teachers to engage with these foundations of lifelong learning. The evolution of the VET sector over the last decade and a half has been characterised by the formidable educational and cultural impact of competency based approaches to teaching and learning. This competency drive, which Cornford (2003) has described as primarily a 'vehicle for

transmission of skill content', has arguably preserved the enduring VET teaching paradigm of directive, transmissive teacher centred teaching practices (and resulting passive learner engagement) and in essence conspired against the notion of a broader learning engagement.

At the same time, the VET sector has been systematically exposed to the brutal realities of a competitive market based model, predicated on a strict purchaser-provider dichotomy between it and funding State and Territory governments. As Harris et al (2001) observe, such changes have been 'fundamentally transformed VET's orientation from education to that of a business and service, and shifted the VET teacher along a continuum from an emphasis on teaching and creating curriculum more towards entrepreneurial brokering and delivery of prescribed competencies' (p.1). This has not only resulted in rapidly increasing casualisation of the VET teaching workforce, it has also lessened resources available for building teaching competence. (Chappell, 2000, Thomas, 2001)

Perhaps as a consequence of this, there has been reduction in the institutional recognition of the significance of teaching in VET, which has been characterised by Cornford (1999a) as a demonstrable process of 'relegat(ing) both the process of learning and those who provide learning, to relatively minor, inessential roles'. Moreover, as Cornford also observes, this perception is reinforced by the paucity of data across the national TAFE network on the actual teaching qualifications held by VET teachers beyond the minimalist Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, suggesting that little significance seems to be placed on the actual level educational qualification (and therefore potential pedagogic capability) VET teachers actually possess.

This apparent devaluing of VET teaching has ironically developed in the context of an emerging consensus amongst professional educators as to the significance of developing more sophisticated *constructivist* learning environments. As such environments are more professionally demanding (i.e. learner centred, encouraging of multiple perspectives and privileging individually constructed meaning) they inherently demand a higher, rather than lessened, level of professional teaching capability.

CHANGING ENVIRONMENT OF VET

Despite these significant and constraining influences, it is apparent there is an opportunity for VET to realise its potential to be a more influential environment for inspiring sustainable lifelong learning. In general terms, public sector (TAFE) VET teachers maintain a strong identification with the importance of teaching and consciously 'celebrate the personal, social, and intellectual development of learners' – that is beyond the acquisition of a range of specific competencies (Chappell and Johnston, 2003). Moreover, major research projects on lifelong learning strongly affirm the reality that such committed teachers are able to effectively nurture lifelong learners, at one level by creating positive learning experiences and at another by providing the capability to autonomously learn. (cited in Thomas, 2001).

Further, there is emerging recognition from industry and government that the demands of workplace change need a broader ongoing learning capability (further beyond that currently codified as generic or employability skills). This aspiration is well reflected in the recently released *Shaping Our Future,* the new national VET strategy for 2004 to 2010 (ANTA 2004). This changing vocational environment, as Chappell (2000) notes, implies a new conception of a 'new working 'self' (that) is constructed as a particular kind of self, one that is flexible, autonomous, motivated, self regulating and orientated to lifelong learning'. However, as Chappell and Johnson (2003) further observe, this is inevitably complicated in

the sector (and indeed in the new strategy) by an inability to define what is perceived as the actual capabilities needed for lifelong learner-workers in the new economy.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the implications of this dialectic between such expansive expectations of accelerated social and workplace change and the general institutionalised rigidity and competency based curricula design (and by implication, of teaching practice) has been inevitably mediated by the classroom VET teacher. As Blom and Clayton (2002) observe, teachers encounter 'seemingly inimical requirements that they be at once compliant agents of government policy and creative, autonomous interpreters of pedagogy'. (p.148) Hence, VET teachers are generally (though not universally) conscious of the danger of a shallow focus on workplace tasks and the important need to cultivate underpinning knowledge and a reflective, critical capability (Smith & Keating, 2003). Moreover, as Smith and Keating (2003) also note, research has shown 'that students consistently want to learn more, and more deeply, than content and skills that relate only to their everyday workplace tasks'. (p.169)

Indeed, this broad reality has been recognised in the current high-level review of Training Packages being undertaken by ANTA, albeit in a indirect way, with themes emerging around the need for enhanced provision of underpinning 'generic' skills as well as greater provision of 'support' materials for teachers to broaden and 'enliven' package curricula relevance. (ANTA, 2003) Interestingly, the third phase consultation paper in this review reflects the conflicting drives facing the sector between stakeholder demands for both (rigid) national consistency as well as learning environments that develop what could be characterised as a capability for lifelong learning in VET graduates. Yet it does recognise the need for a more 'clearly articulated and more contemporary repertoire of pedagogical practices' to underpin package delivery and actively canvassing the current level of 'tightness' between training packages and teaching, learning and assessment (ANTA, 2003).

IS CHANGE REALLY OCCURRING?

If VET is indeed committed to creating lifelong learners, it necessarily needs to shift its focus from institutions to learners (and workplaces as potent sites of learning) and from a focus on engendering technical skills to cultivating broader attributes. (Chappell, 2003) However, the critical question is whether the sector can effectively transform this dominant transmissive paradigm, particularly with limited availability of professional development. Though atomised evidence of innovative teaching practice has recently emerged in the VET sector (i.e. Harris et al, 2002, Mitchell & Wood, 2001), the intrinsically private domain of the classroom means what constitutes current mainstream VET teaching practice remains contestable.

Therefore, this raises the fundamental question frequently encountered in recent debates around VET: can a meaningful capacity for lifelong learning be cultivated in a VET environment focussed on specific competency based skills expectations and uncertain teaching capability? On this question, I concur with Kearns (1999) who asserts that while considerable past focus has been placed on a narrow *training* paradigm (particularly with the evolution of the training package model), a transition is beginning to emerge in the sector which will inevitably lead to a greater recognition of holistic *learning* as an essential foundation of VET into the future.

Considerable anecdotal evidence is apparent in some teacher education programs on the level of disruption, disaffection and even subversion that has accompanied training package implementation. (Darwin*, pers. comm.*) It is uncertain as to whether this initial reaction has abated as teachers have developed 'remedial' strategies to accommodate training package expectations and their own perceptions of appropriate pedagogy, however this would not be an entirely unlikely outcome as packages mature in teaching contexts.

VET TEACHERS AND LIFELONG LEARNING

However, regardless of the eventual outcomes of the current review of training packages, transforming this 'narrow training paradigm' toward a sustainable framework of holistic (lifelong) learning will inevitably prove a significant sectoral challenge. Research conducted by Harris et al (2001) on self perceptions of VET teachers on their levels of professional preparedness, indicated at least half of respondents self-identified their need for professional development to meet such emerging challenges, including cultivating lifelong learning. However, the research reference group sensed this might understate the actual extent of this need.

Perhaps strongly influencing this has been the progressive decline in VET teacher professional development provided to teachers in TAFE over the last decade (Cornford, 1999, Thomas, 2001). This has lead to a potentially lessened capability of teachers to effectively mediate the often conflicting expectations that intersect in the classroom environment and as a consequence force a greater reliance on the literal and narrow use of competency based approaches to teaching and learning. Fundamental to this has been the progressive decline over the last decade of a cohesive national framework of diverse and discursive VET teacher education, which has arguably eroded into a more local instrumentalist drive, primarily revolving around the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, Training Packages or technology skilling (Smith and Keating, 2003, Harris et al, 2001)

In this context, it is evident there remains significant challenges in enhancing VET teacher capability and therefore the further enhancing of VET as a central springboard to the development of capable lifelong learners. Successful teacher education initiatives are likely to be fragmented in impact (given the fragmented system in which they will evolve) and will be highly dependent on improving the professional capability of VET teachers to assimilate emerging constructivist pedagogies within the strongly articulated constraints inherent in a competency based/training package framework. This transition from a training to learning paradigm will also be likely to encounter some significant institutional resistance, with clear evidence of sectoral preference for what Blom and Clayton (2002) describe as 'remedial' professional development and scepticism about the relevance of emerging pedagogies to more traditional skill based disciplines (Harris et al, 2001).

It will also be constrained by the real resource limitations than continue to hinder the scope of professional development offered to teachers by VET providers. The wide spread adoption of an expanded array of training packages in recent years has arguably complicated this further, institutionalising the notion that learning is specifically for work, not for work and life. (Wheelahan, 2004) Having said this, it can be equally argued that it is apparent from debate in teacher education programs that teachers continue to actively shape (and reshape) packages, rather than packages merely shaping teachers.

Hence, to summarise there is a significant pressure on VET teachers to adopt an orientation to teaching that is focussed on a constructivist paradigm if VET is to fulfil its potential to build a learner capability for lifelong learning. This necessitates the abandoning of the

directive, transmissive and narrow approaches to learning that seemed to have organically emerged under the weight of imposed qualifications and curriculum expectations. The question is, given institutional constraints, whether this is really possible.

INNOVATION IN VET TEACHER EDUCATION

With this context in mind, the Department of Teacher Education at the Canberra Institute of Technology (CIT) in 2002 made a conscious decision to radically redefine its approach to teacher education. Perhaps reflecting broader sectoral realities, teacher education at this time primarily (though not exclusively) subscribed to a broadly traditional transmissive, teacher centred model of teaching. This redesign represented a deliberate response to critical reflection on continuing learner resistance to current approaches to teacher education that was consistently emerging in evaluation outcomes. Key themes that emerged centred on a lack of individual relevance to teaching practice, rigidity in teaching methods and related perceptions of an orthodoxy being imposed on teacher-learners.

The process commenced with a systematic review of existing teaching methodologies which were employed in the two primary teacher education programs at CIT: the *Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training* and the postgraduate *Certificate* and *Diploma in Tertiary Teaching and Learning*. Broadly speaking, this demonstrated a high dependence on transmissive and instructional forms of engagement in the Certificate IV and a rigid and didactic orientation in the graduate education program. Given this, an educational redesign process was undertaken (in consultation with teachers and learners) to fundamentally re-orientate these programs.

Essential to this redesign was the conscious adoption of a constructivist framework to guide teaching and learning, centred on creating learning environments that fostered individually constructed meaning, critical reflection and the immersion in authentic learning experiences. In essence, its simple assumption was that the reflective teacher was more inevitably likely to be socially transformative than the 'technician teacher'. (Blom & Clayton, 2002)

Moreover, another related objective was to create more deep, holistic and critical learning experiences that better reflected the demands and expectations of teachers (and learners) in a dynamic vocational education environment. In a broader sense, this strategy was strongly predicated on the assumption identified by Cornford (1999b) that 'effective teaching of cognitive and meta-cognitive skills for lifelong learning will only occur when teachers themselves have the knowledge, skills and confidence to engage in teaching them effectively'. (p.115)

CONSTRUCTIVIST ORIENTATION: ENCOURAGING DEEP, HOLISTIC APPROACHES

This constructivist framework was consciously designed around Biggs' (1999) notion of *constructive alignment*, the related work of Ramsden (1992) on cultivating deep levels of learning and in Brookfield's (1995) framework of critical reflection (the *critically reflective teacher*). It was envisaged that this would provide a substantial framework to create a productive learning environment for vocational teachers to critically reflect on their increasingly challenging teaching realities. This was seen as providing the optimum means of ensuring that new approaches to teacher education at CIT would be centred on processes of active interpretation, with a clear orientation toward the cultivation of deeper, holistic learning (Ramsden, 1992, Biggs, 1999).

Hence, its emphasis would be on encountering a broad prospective learning need, with design principles centred on inspiring ongoing learning beyond the programs' lifespan. These aimed to transform Kearns' (1999) lifelong learning foundations into practice. In summary, these principles were conceptualised in practice at CIT as:

- *integration*: better understanding teaching practice by critical and ongoing analysis of theories, concepts and models;
- *application*: ability to apply new understandings effectively to teaching practice over time and in differing environments; and
- *abstraction*: being able to apply conceptions to diverse contexts and generate innovative approaches, contentions and possibilities.

To achieve this, design practice was further shaped by the approach advocated by Biggs (1999) for developing constructivist orientations at a tertiary level. This approach, characterised as constructive alignment, meant consciously aligning (and therefore maximising consistency) between all elements of the teaching process. In practice this meant:

- clearly (re)defining learning objectives (which define the broad level of anticipated understanding and merely content acquisition);
- creation of a collaborative, critical and dynamic learning environment (based on a constructivist teaching methodology) that encourages the achievement of these objectives at this level;
- the development of well conceived experiential learning activities that contribute directly to the achievement of learning objectives
- design of authentic assessment tasks that actually test the achievement of defined learning objectives.

EARLY OUTCOMES OF RE-ORIENTATION

An action research project was designed and is underway considering the impact and effectiveness of these changes to pedagogy in the CIT *Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training* and *Graduate Certificate/Diploma in Tertiary Teaching and Learning*. Preliminary outcomes of this research require further reflection, however data collected to date broadly suggests the re-orientation of CIT teacher education programs has had a strongly positive impact on teacher pedagogy, their resultant capability to positively enhance learning environments and nurture lifelong learning skills of learners. However this re-orientation has also created both some anticipated and unanticipated pressures for teacher education. These can be broadly summarised as:

- *high level of teacher-learner commitment*: one of the most difficult realities of creating a learner centred environment is the greater expectations this inevitably places on the learners to actively engage in programs. With the significant resource limitations (and therefore high teaching loads) teacher-learners endure, their ability to find the space to research, critically reflect and produce 'authentic' assessment is often very limited. This meant the initial lowering of expectations of learning engagement compared to that originally expected in the design phase;
- *resource commitment from teacher education*: re-orientating these programs has required considerable initial and ongoing research, reflexivity and risk taking by teachers in a small and somewhat isolated teacher education area. Inevitably this has meant a hard struggle, particularly as this approach requires considerable energy, insight and adaptability in sustaining a learner focus;

- *learner resistance*: this re-orientation has encountered considerable learner resistance, particularly in its earliest manifestations where approaches were still being formalised. Interestingly, in exploring this issue with disaffected learners, it was apparent that much of this arose firstly from an expected didactic approach in teacher education (and related learner passivity) and secondly a view that this form of professional development was more to appease an outside party/regulatory environments rather than being driven by individual motivation. Hence, we have further highlighted the expectations created by the use of constructivist methodologies in early teaching sessions to assist learners to adapt this changed norm;

- *differential impact*: perhaps predictably, the adoption of a constructivist orientation has proven considerably more problematic in the highly structured (training package) context of the Certificate IV program than the graduate level program. Though considerable progress has been made this is hindered by the complex impositions of eight subjects and related assessment expectations. The graduate program, with obviously a more open curricula, has been a much more productive transition;

- *scaffolding*: inevitability this approach has placed much greater levels of responsibility on learners to explore their own perspectives, attitudes and values, as well as self direct more of their own research efforts. This has proved difficult for some learners (particularly those without recent study experience), meaning we've needed to progressively introduce additional scaffolding for some learners to assist them to actively participate in debates and learning activities

- *managing contradictions*: finally, the issues canvassed earlier in this paper, related to the conflicting discourses in which VET teaching take place, has complicated the adoption of a constructivist orientation. Teacher-learners who encounter learning focussed toward a capability for ongoing (arguably lifelong) learning are frequently frustrated by perceived and/or actual barriers presented in their competency based teaching environments. Hence, there is an active attempt to critically debate this apparent contradiction and develop strategies both for the classroom and toward influencing this broader sectoral debate.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, the role of VET as a key site for cultivating lifelong learning has been acknowledged, albeit being complicated by the contradictory forces that shape this learning environment. It is apparent that competency based approaches have sustained an emphasis on a training paradigm and this has had a profound impact on the capacity of VET to move to a conscious focus on building a capability for lifelong learning. Evidence is emerging of a transition from this training paradigm, with renewed focus on building a broader capability for ongoing learning, though considerable differences remain amongst sectoral stakeholders on the extent to which this needs to move along the lifelong learning 'continuum'.

Teachers in VET are key mediators in this debate, even if this is all too infrequently acknowledged. The attempt at CIT to consciously adopt a constructivist orientation in teacher education has demonstrated that it is possible to enhance this capacity, by providing the inspiration to build learning environments that can be transformative. Though on a small scale, and not without its significant dilemmas, this attempt at change in approaches to VET teacher education may represent one strategy that enhances the ability of VET teachers to encourage learners on the turbulent path to building lifelong learning.

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