

THE MEASUREMENT OF LEARNING CONVERSATIONS: THE ILLUSION OF THE ABSOLUTE, OBSCURES MEANING

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the forces upon and concerns of VET researchers when attempting to frame research to develop our understanding of current learning environments. The concern of the paper is that VET researchers often find their activity is shaped and framed by institutional pressures for outcomes which restrict the opportunity to display the complexity of the learning environment and the often paradoxical narratives.

Three recent research projects are critically reviewed from this perspective to highlight these concerns. The conclusion indicates some of the more critical questions researchers should be asking to ensure the framing process includes and is shaped by learner perceptions.

Introduction

I called it Karioke because it is like our lives are already made for us. (Dennis Potter, 1996)

To what extent is our research path already mapped out for us? To what extent does it exclude the opportunity for learners to shape the process? The conference provides us with an opportunity to step back and examine our practice and specifically targets the issues of quality and diversity. Who determines the quality of our research and what criteria should we use to make such measurements? What is excluded from our current focus and perceptions?

This paper will argue that while we must take responsibility for the quality of our research we often find it is shaped by institutional pressures rather than the stories of learning. The *measurements* that we make are often pre-framed (Dunbar, Garud and Raghuram, 1996) from the paradigm of learning as acquisition, rather than learning as new meaning developed through conversations. We may fall victim as researchers to the *social traps* that exclude diversity, and which Barry and Bateman (1996) suggest, encourage other managers to ultimately select excluding options.

. . . we adopt seemingly beneficial behaviours that may have negative consequences over time or for a larger collective.

The quality of our research is therefore driven by institutional perceptions to create authorised knowledge, of which we are often prisoners. The criteria by which quality is judged often excludes the role of learners in determining how effectively their experiences have been displayed and in legitimising the knowledge created (Seddon, 1997).

On the issue of diversity the argument in this paper is that the focus on distributable results and outcomes often clouds perhaps more valuable perceptions about the nature of changes and process in the learning environment. The pursuit of absolute meanings that may satisfy some more powerful stakeholders, can actually obscure meaning which lies within learners' narratives. Such stakeholder perceptions dominate the workplace knowledge creation (Stevenson, 1998; Matusik and Hill, 1998) and the subsequent framing of research.

Dennis Potter suggests that perhaps our lives are already mapped out for us. Not a charted course, but the chaotic ride of sailing in an ocean where our direction governed by forces more powerful than those at our disposal. The journey is in fact predetermined, and like many of his characters, all we do is sing the same songs, maybe in our own voice, or maybe in mime to those who have done it better before. If our lives are thus pre-framed, how difficult it is for us to see and display life as others experience it, rather than as others would like it to be seen.

If we accept that learning environments are both seamless and multiple in their location, and intrinsically fluid in their nature, then they must present us with intractable dilemmas. It is unlikely that hidden within the complexity will be a core of learning truths waiting to be discovered. The argument here is that decisions concerning research measurement are particularly complex when learning

environments are viewed as a continual series of conversations which provide an almost infinite number of perspectives through the mix of individuals, their interaction, the variety of locations and the passage of time. The early construction of more positivist frames would therefore seem incompatible and counterproductive (Garrick and Kirkpatrick, 1998). However our research environment contains powerful institutional voices that exert legitimate, referent, expert and coercive pressures upon our research activities through their texts (Foucault, 1977).

The paper suggests that there are some specific factors that pressure researchers to move towards a more positivist approach which may restrict the extent to which the rich picture of the learning environment is captured within the data. First, research frameworks are often formed well in advance of research activity due to the institutional pressures of funding applications and visible accountability (Seddon, 1997). Second, research proposals in an attempt to be specific about methodology and purpose, often err towards the quantifiable and louder, more accessible, voices. Third the audience for project outcomes drives the agenda often to the expense of the process.

Of course it is others who fall prey to such traps. This paper will critically review recent personal experiences of VET research and explore with scepticism the early construction of research frames and their implications. There needs to be particular concern about the validity of data where the framing of the research has been more constructed by institutional pressures rather than shaped by learner events. The conclusion suggests that given these influences, the generalisability of VET research findings should perhaps carry a government health warning for relevance in an increasingly fluid environment. Perhaps a greater focus upon an interpretive framework for research conclusions may be beneficial.

The Nature of Learning Environments

Learning goes way beyond training, embracing structural adjustment, the use of experimentation, the development of new language and the reshaping of values . . . Knowledge then has to be codified and diffused within the organisation and entrenched knowledge and beliefs broken down... the relation between such learning and strategy formation and implementation is reciprocal. (Whipp, 1992, p.51)

The complexity of learning environments presents researchers with a dilemma. Learning experiences are both part of much wider organisational development frames and are also part of each individual's lifeworld. It is difficult to focus adequately on both. We are well aware of how complex and difficult to understand our own learning journeys are. The complexity that exists when many people are grouped and interacting in an organisation presents even greater challenges. The shared agreement of new knowledge is inevitably about competing interests and power. As Cooper and Law (1995) express it, knowledge and power inhabit each other.

In the play *Karaoke* we are presented with many layers of reality. The play is written by a dying playwright who tells the story of a dying playwright making a play where the actors step from his videoed scenes into a strangely similar reality, where their real life echoes the script. At the same time we see the conceptual basis for the next play created. In the complexity of learning environments we are faced with the same layer upon layer. There are organisational structures and interfaces where culture meets culture, and personal interaction where new meaning may be negotiated. We attempt to deal with the most complex process of development at both the individual level and at the organisational level, recognising the differences that exist (Childs and Wagner, 1998). We attempt to create new knowledge about others creating knowledge. As in *Karaoke*, it becomes difficult to determine what is real and what is a reflection or pastiche. Harvey (1989) suggests that the discontinuity of our learning environments should discourage us from pursuing any relationships other than evolving processes.

This of course, is the kind of environment in which deconstruction can flourish. If it is impossible to say anything of solidarity and permanence in the midst of this ephemeral and fragmented world, then why not join in the language game. (p.291)

The dilemma is that VET researchers are often already themselves framed as deductive reasoners, who will establish truth, rather than those who search for instabilities (Lyotard, 1984). How often do the research goals that frame research activity recognise that exploring competing discourses, and recognising the continual shifting of differences as a process, are legitimate outcomes? There appear to be pressures which encourage researchers to frame their research from the privileged national perspective and explore the differing perceptions and preferences from within this frame. The goal of a singular knowledge and a controllable text seems to take precedence over research representations

of a continually developing and changing knowledge about the learning environment (Legge, 1995). This is however not easily learned for those of the modern era as Harvey (1989, p.49) has suggested.

The fragmentation, the pluralism and the authenticity of other voices and other worlds poses the acute problem of communication and the means of exercising power through command thereof.

To what extent is our research funded to legitimise change process or to inform change processes (McIntyre, 1998)? It seems that often it is based upon a functionalist perspective where the assumption is that the social structure of the learning environment is tangible, constructed and controllable (Harper, 1998), and where the focus is upon adapting relationships between people. Managing the learning culture. Perhaps we are locked into a traditional, comfortable, legitimised frame. How often do we feel institutional pressures to conceptualise and frame the research from one of the other three paradigms that Morgan (1995 and 1996) proposes? The interpretive perspective, based upon the assumption that the social world is a product of how individual groups interpret the world, and how such multiple realities interact within the learning network. The radical humanist perspective, which is based on the assumption that we construct organisations based upon the forces have deeply shaped our psychic development and that our unconscious is released in our organisational behaviours and learning motivation. The radical structuralist perspective, based on the assumption that organisations are a socially created reality, but that they are the product of the tensions and power that exists between social groups. Shared meaning is actually impossible and is replaced by a deferral of difference where individuals and group are persuaded to replace identity with organisation. From this perspective organisations are instruments of domination, seduction or catastrophe and their learning mechanisms reflect the same cultural tensions. No easy answers here.

The functionalist perspective that is concerned with problem solving and the enhancement of order, is the image that we have been sold by government and organisations and shapes and pre-frames much research. The more interpretive perspective pushes us to understand the process of that order by recognising the excluded narratives of symbolic relationships and questioning the myths which support the quest for certainty. The more radical perspectives draw organisations as suppressing, political and exploitative, and encourages us to realise that supposed order of the learning environments which we view is often superficial and just masks the underlying contradiction and personality dysfunctions. From these perspectives we may uncover the barriers that exist in the all too real enacted world or gain understanding of systems in crisis. The only logic we see in organisational learning frameworks is perhaps what we want to see by ignoring the discursive complex that exists between the cultures within that learning environment and organisation. It could be suggested that the order portrayed in government texts does not exist in the complex reality of the training world but that it is researchers who retrospectively draw the pieces and stories together? Linstead (1996) suggest that such evolving organisational cultures are the result of an interweaving of texts from subgroups within organisations, where symbolic action leads to the negotiation and construction of new meaning. Should our research frame focus on learners, or is it always incomplete without the wider context of organisational knowledge and power?

If we recognise learning environments as both seamless and multiple in their location, and intrinsically fluid in their nature perhaps the framing of our research should mirror that reality (Legge, 1995). The early construction of more positivist frames, shaped in the main by tradition and more functionalist institutional perspectives would therefore seem less compatible.

The Research Environment

The initial argument has been that there are pressures which frame research activity that may inhibit the inclusion of the richness, complexity, diversity and continuous nature of learning conversations. This section focuses upon three specific implications of such pressures ; the early framing of research proposals ; the detailed specification of methodology and data sites ; and the anticipated project outcomes. How may the pressures of a positivist and functionalist perspective shape research activity.

First, research frameworks are often formed well in advance of research activity. There is a requirement for funding applications and institutional support for visible accountability, even before preliminary investigation of the learning environment has taken place. It is at this point decisions are often made about what will be included within the project, and yet such inputs often exclude what might have been valuable learner contribution. The project is to some extent pre-framed, with the contribution of reference groups bringing expert power to shape the approach to the learning environment. In an environment where the need for continual learning is often interpreted as a need for continued credentialism, it is likely a more positivist framing will emerge. The focus on product rather than process is often set by the time line. In the mind of the researcher control of the data sites

perhaps becomes more important than the discontinuity within them. The focus on learning may exclude the wider frame of the organisation or the inner frame of the participants' lifeworlds.

Pilot activity may be used to involve learners, but is likely to be researcher led rather than learners led, dominated by the need to test rather than explore. In many ways it is the clear division between pilot and data collection which often exist, that can deny the symbiotic relationship in most research between the two processes. Researchers start as the learners. This personal learning slowly diminishes as the complex data from the learning environment is gathered, each process reciprocally feeding the other.

Second, research proposals in an attempt to be specific about methodology and purpose, often err towards the quantifiable and louder more accessible voices.

Academic traditions of measurement appear to give legitimacy to statistical evidence where weight equates with truth. The experience of critical corridor conversations is more difficult to justify. Story telling often lacks legitimacy in comparison with the allure of tested instruments. Such instruments may curtail learner responses and determine what is defined as the location of the learning experience. The value of learner researcher conversations is less evident.

In addition there is the dilemma about the early framing of research goals and questions, the deductive or inductive approaches. Where the researcher defines a pure research target and then searches for suitable sites, they may often be more self selecting than we would care to admit. The limitations of site access restrict the boundaries of the research and degrade the research data available. Conversely, taking advantage of available and rich data sources may enable the learning environment to frame relevant research questions. Which course of action is more likely to represent the complexity and changing nature of interactivity in learning environments, and enable learners to shape the project?

Third, the audience for project outcomes and positive outcomes drives the agenda often to the expense of the process. The researcher becomes manager and takes on the responsibilities and discourse of that interactivity. The need to manage and control the project and outcomes may be displaced to the data analysis. The fears of insufficient data are replaced usually quiet swiftly by data overload ; the fears of a lack of patterns, by euphoria about emerging trends. The desire for consumable product may outweigh the desire for narrative integrity.

The need to represent one's self in research papers, conferences and the cumulative statistics of Higher Education may be greater than the need to represent the complexity of the learning environment studied. As Billett (1998) has indicated, it is best to view research outcomes that fall into neat categories with some scepticism, if your experience involves you in complex and paradoxical narratives that are never so obviously discernible.

Deconstructing Personal Experience

To what extent and how, do we bend with the pressures upon us? How do more powerful perspectives shape our research activity, and to what extent do such changes work to exclude learner voices? While I know my own research has been constructed with sometimes sleepless integrity, I must recognise that, just as no review is independent, these research projects were framed by specific pressures. I have chosen to examine three recent projects in the light of the previous argument? What evidence is there of the influence of more functionalist and positivist approaches that may have excluded the examination of process, in pursuit of a pre framed product?

The first project involved following over a hundred VET learners over a six month period and determining how the experiences they had influenced their development of learning skill. The results indicated a significant linkage to experiences where participants were responsible for the preparation and presentation of learning evidence.

I began with a clear objective, and nothing got in the way. The project was driven by a need for academic outcomes within a defined time period. While recognising the complexity of the learning environment, the project sought to exclude organisational issues by focussing on issues of individual competence. The pilot activity was used to refine pre-determined approaches, and pre-tested instruments were used within available but limited sites. The quantitative approach was accidentally enhanced by serendipitous corridor conversations which provided the most fortuitous illustrative material. The research structure may well have excluded the process of developing knowledge's which were not anticipated by the instruments. Critical influences of the work and learning relationship

was uncovered, but did not fit the pre-framed objectives which were constructed to simplify the process of workbased learning (Childs and Wagner, 1998). While I cared enough to give seminar feedback to every site and written research conclusion to each participant, they remained patronisingly my subjects. Marks out of ten – five.

The second project involved reviewing over the past decade the implications of CBT for an industrial company. The results indicated a close relationship between quality standards and training. The quality drive had systematised the approach to training. However the systematic approaches had led to a rigidity in process and management, which were ironically, a barrier to the flexibility that the company now required. The project recognised the importance of organisational culture as the participants constructed the past decade. The use of a series of in depth vertical interviews built a broad picture of the organisational changes. By definition, the project focussed on longer serving employees, management selected and excluded those who had left the culture perhaps with different interpretations of the meaning of events. The project excluded external providers and the influence that their definition of products and marketing influence may have had on the process of development. Each interview informed the structure of the subsequent interview. The open approach enabled the participants to lead the process. Time pressures for outcomes prevented an adequate review of the final draft by the participants. Marks out of ten - 8

The third project involved examining what training managers wanted from the training they purchased and how they expected workplace activity to change as a result. The results indicated a clear connection between those who looked for learning ability development and the subsequent adaptation of work processes and organisational learning. This project responded to a tight time line and suffered from a very limited critical review process. However a more open format of interviews enabled participants to interpret issues in individual ways and give feedback on the interview transcripts. The process of analysis, which involved the initial construction of case studies, was shaped by the difference which appeared between the cases. While the single data sources prohibited triangulation, they were still able to indicate a wide difference in learning relationships, from reflective communities to those where purchasing training had dislocated learning relationships (Childs and Wagner, 1998). The restriction to a single data collection limited the projects ability to reflect changes in perception. Marks out of ten - seven

Conclusion

The concern expressed here is that while we are examining how learning is constructed and learners construct, we too are constructed and often coerced to offer a more unified reconstruction. In accepting the perceptions of powerful influences, we lessen the ability of the participants to frame the research outcomes. We too are constructed (Jonassen, 1991). The principle of endogenous construction may suggest that as researchers we are constructed by our past experiences and knowledge so that traditional patterns of pre framing are hard to resist. The principle of exogenous constructivism may indicate that our projects are constructed to meet our perceptions of the expectation we see in our institutions and peer groups. Finally the principle of dialecticism may suggest that the group with whom we most discuss our current learning dilemmas will have the greatest influence upon the research project construction. In many cases, these influences that construct our learning are less likely to be VET participants and our ability to develop a shared meaning about the learning environment diminishes.

Managerialism seeks to construct. Rees and Rodley (1995) suggest that Higher and Tertiary education and training institution have been subject to similar growths in managerialism in the pursuit of more, with less. This preoccupation with control, that we have all the answers, and are not constantly seeking them, is a strong and dysfunctional influence for research activity emanating from such institutions (Rhodes, 1996). It is likely to not just dislocate learners from their facilitators, but also researchers from narratives. The managerial rhetoric of participation within a discourse of compliance, can lead to a corresponding research rhetoric of contribution within a discourse of exclusion and compartmentalisation. The distance between the rhetoric and reality in competence based approaches has often been rather like the Kings Clothes (Barratt-Pugh, 1995)). The suggestion is that we need to make a personal investment in resisting early framing of research projects so that we may be able to reap the latter dividend of greater participant contribution in shaping the research frame. A more fluid approach to the research frame would better mirror the complexity and difference of the learning environment.

While much research will still be shaped by prior grant applications, both peer review, and peer and practitioner acceptance, defines the effectiveness of much research. It is therefore, for each researcher to question any framework that does not enable and include multiple learner voices in our

tentative constructions of what is a complex environment Cope and Kalantzis, 1997. Without a broader framing we risk being the tail that wags the dog, as we misrepresent their realities.

Participant data should shape and not just inform the research frame. Where we become subject to a managerial approach to research, with goals of more for less, there may be pressures to exclude the costs in human terms. Learning construction should be part of a wider life and seen as part of a wider culture, not a quality assurance pursuit. Currently training markets create consumers and strangers rather than learning relationships and dislocate knowing from doing and reflecting from doing (Mulcahy and James, 1998). They often exclude situated knowledges. It may be that more ethnographic enquiry methods may be applicable to represent the reality of such subcultures and validate the outcomes.

Research results should perhaps reflect the discontinuous and multiple nature of the learning environment and pay more regard to the complex political action taking place at the organisational level which frames such events. Perhaps outcomes should state more clearly the particular characteristics of the research sites and like Hofstede's (1994) dimensions of culture, clarify the wider framing forces in the project sites.

Perhaps we should judge the quality of our research not on our ability to tell their story or even stories, but on our ability to let *their* stories be told through the data. This often means resisting pressures to frame the research early and resist the pressures to exclude the diversity of learning experiences. It appears that in an environment of discontinuous change, the heart of the learning culture lies at the point of greatest difference.

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