Teaching practice and research practice: Not oil and water

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Abstract

In 2002 several TAFE teachers and program co-ordinators from four Australian states became Associate Researchers in a University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) research project *an industry–led VET system: Issues for policy, practice and practitioners.*

This experience is indicative of the changing nature the work of practitioners in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and tapped into changes at two levels. Firstly there were the evolving stories of individual teachers from various disciplines, managers and community representatives as they discussed in interview the changes they had experienced in relation to industry-led VET delivery over the last five years. Secondly there were TAFE practitioner own stories of their participation as Research Associates in a major national collaborative research project that exemplifies the changing nature of their own work. This paper is about this second level. Towards the end of the research project, each Associate Researcher was invited to talk about the experience of being involved in this research which included the conduct of research interviews. They were asked what they thought had been beneficial to them and to their institutes and what they found to be the most difficult. Their responses are categorised and briefly discussed.

Introduction

Rarely has research been considered an integral part of vocational education and training (VET) teaching practice. But a recent experience of concurrent teaching practice and research practice demonstrated that, unlike oil and water, the two can mix successfully. The involvement of several VET practitioners in a major project *An industry–led VET system: Issues for policy, practice and practitioners* (OVAL 2003 Research Working Papers Reports 1-7) tapped into the changing nature of work on two levels. The first level was that of the stories gathered as data from individual teachers from various disciplines, managers of VET delivery, managers of local industries or businesses, and community access representatives. These stories collectively showed the changes experienced in relation to industry-led VET delivery over the last five years. The second level was the involvement of the practitioners as Research Associates with the Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (RCVET)[1] University of Technology, Sydney in a major national collaborative research project that included the conduct of research interviews. This involvement exemplifies the changing nature of VET practitioners' work. Some of those involved were teachers/lecturers/trainers while others were co-ordinators/managers but all became researchers. This paper is not about the major project findings but rather is about this second level of involvement. It is about giving 'voice' to the Research Associates and providing a space to tell their stories of their experience.

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[1] Now Organisational, Vocational and Adult Learning (OVAL Research)

Literature related to aspects of collaborative research partnerships

Collaborative research partnerships have been well documented in contemporary literature. Some examples are: exploring collaboration of institutions in research partnerships in adult education (Solomon, Boud, Leonitis & Staron 2001a); using partnerships as an operating platform in a research centre (Bloch & Hoggard 1999); reflections of a group of TAFE co-researchers on their teaching practice (Walsh, Bennett, Schofield & Melville 2000); methodological dilemmas in collaborative research practice (Scheeres &Solomon 2000a); changed positioning of academic researchers in collaborative research (Scheeres & Solomon 2000b); self reflection and social action in aboriginal/non-aboriginal team research (McIntyre & Bennett 1998); researchers as collaborative workplace learners (Solomon, Boud, Leonitis & Staron 2001b). While the research has some resonance with these issues, there appears to be no critical mass of literature that focuses on the engagement of practitioners with the changing nature of their work through their involvement in research and how they report that experience.

The research process

The following research outline contextualises the practitioner 'voices'. The research was designed to be multidisciplinary, collaborative and capacity building. It was multidisciplinary in that it drew not only from educational theory but also from theories of work organisation, public policy, industrial relations and the labour market. It was collaborative in that it aimed to maximise opportunities to draw on a broad range of data through the collective knowledge of a range of VET stakeholders by involving them in the research. The 'practice and practitioners' stakeholders included students, teachers/lecturers/trainers, heads of teaching divisions, business managers, access and equity managers, work placement co-ordinators and chief executive officers in both TAFE and non-TAFE registered training organisations as well as representatives of both community access groups and employers in local industries. It was designed to enhance VET research capacity by involving practitioners in the research in ways that built on and extended their existing analytical and research capabilities.

Selection of researchers

The four institutes invited to participate represented a cross section of both metropolitan and regional areas and either conducted courses in, or had access to teachers and students in, the vocational areas of Manufacturing, Information Technology, Tourism and Hospitality as well as Pre-vocational studies. These areas were chosen because they represented a range of industries with differing training histories, employment opportunities and relationships with the VET sector (Chappell 2003). Initially eight practitioners were nominated to participate in the research, two from each of four TAFE institutes) with one seconded nominee being replaced (a total of 9). All were invited to become Associate Researchers for the duration of their involvement in the research.

Profiles of the practitioner/Associate Researchers

The positions[2] held by the practitioners included principal lecturer, lecturer, trainer, manager of research and development, consultant, part/time lecturer, campus manager, acting project officer and acting teaching and learning consultant (Melville 2003). Secondly the range of professional and industrial experience brought to the project by the practitioners was varied and extensive. It included experience in relevant industries, in teaching, and in teaching and learning management. Such experience had been gained in a range of public, private, corporate and commercial enterprises. Types of experience included policy advice, national examination and moderation (overseas), workplace assessment and training, self-employment, conduct of research and the development of strategic future research directions, organisational learning and curriculum development. The range of professional/industrial areas where this experience was gained included the automotive sector both overseas and in Australia, service management in major companies, economics, geography, biology, environmental science, geography, and social work, aged care, physical disabilities, staff development, hospitality in hotel and health services, tourism and travel, rural and agricultural industries, sales, events management, labour market programs, small business and customer communication. As one of the Associate Researchers commented '…*we were a 'hotch-potch' weird group of people (I can say that that because I was one of them) who had little in common in experience but brought together for a common purpose'* (in Melville 2002).

Experience in research related activities ranged from none to some experience in small research projects (as university students), experience in market research, to being an institute research and development manager.

Research Associate involvement

The first step for them was to participate in a research forum at UTS which primarily provided the opportunity to meet as a team, to discuss the aims and procedures of the research and to participate in the development of the research questions and the research instruments (survey forms and interview protocols). For reasons of space these instruments are not included with this paper as they exceed 10 pages in themselves.

The Research Associates undertook additional tasks within their own institutes. These included reviewing the draft survey and interview questions formulated from the Research Forum discussions, selecting classes and teachers to be surveyed, inviting and encouraging representatives from institute management and teaching units, and community and business representatives to participate in interviews, then conducting the interviews, returning data to RCVET and disseminating research progress to colleagues.

Method of interviewing

Specific reference is made to the interviewing process as the practitioners requested briefing in this area. Typically, interviews are used when the research requires detailed and personal accounts (Denzin and Lincoln 1998) particularly in relation to values, beliefs, attitudes and feelings. They are used extensively where people are asked to describe in depth such issues as the way they do their work, how they feel about their work, or their life histories.

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[2] names of positions varied from state to state eg. teacher/trainer/lecturer

The method of interviewing the practitioners used in this research is what is termed the semi-structured interview that uses a protocol (schedule) consisting of broad questions to trigger responses designed to provide responses useful in answering particular research questions. In addition, the interviewer is at liberty to use 'prompts' or to 'probe' for more depth, detail or clarification, (ie. it is not a verbal survey). As few of the practitioners had experience in conducting such interviews an interview briefing was included in the initial Research Forum. The briefing, as well as involving the associate researchers in the development of the interview protocols, included a session (summarised below) on the RCVET Code of Ethics in relation to interviewing and some 'Quick Tips' on the interview process itself.

Code of ethics and research interviewing process

The RCVET Code of Ethics[3] includes the principles of non-invasion of, and respect for, privacy and confidentiality of individuals and obtaining informed consent from the interview respondents to conduct the interview which includes the right to withdraw.

While it is generally acknowledged that each interviewer will have their own style, the following points of process were discussed—seeing interviewing as a 'conversation with a purpose' (Lincoln and Guba 1985, Minichiello et al 1994), briefing the interviewees on the purpose and process of the interview, keeping the setting comfortable and non-threatening, using prompts and probes as required to develop issues, obtaining permission to record (or take notes), sharing anecdotes, building rapport, avoiding leading questions and debriefing at the end of the interview. These and additional aspects of interviewing can be found in research methodology texts such as Kvale (1996), Glesne & Peshkin (1992) and Lindloff (1995) and interpersonal communication texts such as Mohan et al (1997), and Minichiello et al (1995).

Reviewing the Associate Researcher experience

Associate Researcher involvement was limited to the development of the surveys and the interview schedules, the planning of the research process and the collection of the data. Due to timelines and financial limitations it was not possible in this instance to extend participation to the final analysis of the data. The ideal (in the best of 'ideal worlds') would have been to bring the group back for a data analysis workshop.

During the later stages of the project, I invited each Associate Researcher to talk about the experience of being involved in this research The interviews were conducted by telephone, (with detailed notes taken) and were of half an hour to one hour's duration. The interview process was again semi-structured with a simple protocol as follows. I asked—

- What were the best aspects of being involved?
- What they felt had benefited them personally?
- How they felt the College/Institute had benefited?
- What were the worst aspects of being involved?

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[3] RCVET, Code of Ethics Information leaflet, University of Technology, Sydney.

- Were there ways the involvement could be enhanced/made more beneficial etc.? and
- Any additional comments!

Prompts and probes were used for further development of some questions.

Findings and discussion —the practitioner voices

The 'voices' from the practitioner interviews (in italics within the text) are used here to describe their research experience and can be categorised in the following ways:

Professional and personal benefits from being involved the research

— Having exposure to the world of 'real life' research:

Individuals found *exposure to a 'real live' project* beneficial particularly as *the methodology was a new learning experience.* One practitioner came *to appreciate the differences in the concepts of outcomes of a* [university] *research project in contrast to the customer focused "market" outcomes of market research. Exposure to the realities of project planning…data collection, keeping to budgets and timelines etc* and *being given the autonomy to get on with it* were also reported as being beneficial.

— Extending professional understandings through the Research Forum:

Individuals reported that participation in the initial research forum *sharpened awareness of the area and…direction* [of the research] and that they appreciated the *opportunity to become involved in the mainstream…at national level. I've enjoyed being in a* [topically] *leading-edge project. It leads into the bigger agenda of where teaching/training is going. Working with educators at the leading edge of training reform was a great experience. The interaction between the diverse group of people and gaining an understanding of where they were coming from* and *the brainstorming sessions,* were also reported as being useful. In addition *having exposure to the development of the instruments made it easier when students needed explanations of some of the survey questions. We were exposed to different ideas, people in different roles and with different perspectives. Bringing it all together as a group was excellent'.*

— Increasing working knowledge and making connections:

Learning about other areas within the institute—their issues and constraints and also *hearing outside reaction to the students we send to industry* was beneficial as *normally I wouldn't have this type of exposure. Although I couldn't put in the time that was really necessary* [because of additional work commitments] *I am still glad I was involved as it was intellectually interesting to me at the subject matter level…there were some interesting insights into assumptions* and there was *benefit from the sharing of knowledge and experience and new insights. Being able to talk across the range of institutes represented a broader picture—a better understanding of my own institute—I don't easily have that opportunity as a part-timer. Being able to make contact with a variety of people in the mainstream of TAFE* was also reported as being beneficial.

— Benefiting personally from having exposure to research processes:

Learning research strategies that can be transferred to other situations was described as being valuable *professional development* as was being called on to *work outside comfort zones* when collecting data in unfamiliar areas. Also *the exposure to the practical application of research methodology was useful as I was doing a Graduate Certificate*

that included a theoretical subject on research methodology. The opportunity to use the research process in my Master's degree as an independent study unit was also reported as a personal benefit. *It was a great gesture to be offered Associate Researcher status...it* [not only] *recognised our involvement but it is useful for inclusion in resumes.*

— Having support from the core research team:

Being constantly informed by e-mail, and *the organisation of the information package* [re surveys and interviews] *was excellent and made our job very easy. Interviewers went out well prepared* with the support *of the core team* [at UTS].

Institute benefits

— Providing feedback to institutes:

The institutes have had benefit and they will continue to have benefit [from the participation and feedback]. *The CEOs and the business managers—the people with a worldview—are the ones who will benefit most. Using a case study approach made it easy to report back to the institute at every opportunity* and *the institute had a visit from the UTS project manager which resulted in the notes supplied on the day being used for institute staff development* and *after the interviews there were some formal and even more informal debates at management level about the project.*

— Providing renewed and closer connections with local industry:

Involvement in the project has heightened awareness of the training agenda in the participating industries. [A local enterprise] *put us back on their Newsletter list and began negotiating with the institute to run a course* [after a period of estrangement] and *the UTS Project Manager has been invited by an external industry association to address its members.*

— Building closer connections with community agencies:

We had very positive feedback and have built up valuable networks from the involvement' and *the representative from* [a local agency] *saw value in being involved.*

— Increasing awareness of an 'industry-led' system among institute staff:

Data gathering raised the level of awareness of an industry-led system among staff…any sense of needing to consider whether training was meeting industry needs had previously been vague and the research *provided a forum for the sharing of working knowledge.*

As would be expected, as well as these beneficial aspects of being practitioner / researchers, there were also some difficulties. These were expressed as follows:

— Experiencing feelings of isolation:

I was skeptical of being involved in the beginning because of being so far from Sydney but the discussion [Research Forum] *with the input into protocols and the timeframe was great.* There was also concern for the *loss of local leadership in the middle of the research, which resulted in loss of focus on the strategic aims.*

— Estimating and understanding the time that it takes to 'do' research:

Considerable concern was expressed at the *time it takes to get things done! We had expectations when we left Sydney of getting classes of 20 within a timeframe. The reality is that many of the classes that are nominally expected to have 20, in fact in reality may only have 12 or 13, so you then look for additional classes at the same level* [all involving extra time!]. *It involves a lot of leg work and a lot of 1:1 negotiation. I didn't appreciate*

what was involved in chasing up contacts and as result underestimated the time required. Dealing with inconsistencies in the naming of groups and positions nationally caused confusion also slowing down the process. *The naming of the 'groups' to be studied was confusing between the states and between states and UTS.* One Associate Researcher clearly stated that he thought *the research should not have taken as long as it did.*

— Gaining the commitment of others

The core business [of TAFE] *is not research—research is peripheral to the functional focus of TAFE, therefore it's difficult to get the initial commitment. Trying to get others to understand the importance of participating in the project* [eg. in surveys] *was difficult.* However *where the section head e-mailed all staff explaining that the survey was being done and that a staff member would be contacting class teachers, the process was very easy—where this didn't happen it was much more difficult.*

— Not being part of the analysis of the data:

For me collecting but not being involved in the analysis of the data was difficult…I like to be involved in seeing what is coming out of the data, and finally

— Managing work loads in the current work climate:

Pulling in existing staff who already had heavy workloads and illnesses added to their loads. In today's climate most people have a commitment level to work at 110%. Taking on a research project usually comes on top of the 110% and we can't keep on doing this. Not having enough information up-front was a problem—if I had known the extent of the demands on my time at that point I would not have taken it on (because of other work commitments), but also *the time to be involved was a problem but I knew that—and I still would have become involved.*

Other difficulties, mostly practical things such as *lack of familiarity with the recording equipment* and *difficulties with appropriate labeling of tapes* were also reported.

After discussing the difficulties, Associate Researchers were asked if they could suggest ways of improving the process. The responses largely fell into the areas of improvements to the process of selection of researchers and improvements to details of survey processes. In terms of the selection of researchers one suggestions was to recruit *a team of teachers* [rather than just two people] *from each institute* and another was that the *election of researchers should be more targeted within the institute (with release time), rather than an e-mail being sent around calling for 'expressions of interest',* because *'with our inexperience simple enthusiasm is not enough.*

Practitioner reflections on conducting interviews

As was mentioned earlier, this paper includes particular reference to the research interviewing process which was a new experience for many of the practitioners. The practitioners expressed their responses to their experience of organising and conducting interviews within the workplace in the following ways:

— Feeling good about doing interviewing:

It was good to do the interviews…the people I interviewed I knew well and we felt comfortable with each other. Most individuals appeared to enjoy being involved in the

interviews, particularly in just being able concentrate uninterrupted for one hour and *when we went out into industry some of the small employers said '...no one has ever asked us before what we think about the system'.*

— Becoming interested in the unfolding story [and being analytical in the process]:

It was interesting to hear similarities in the comments from different people but to also note the differences. I enjoyed doing the interviews—I enjoyed the process of watching the picture unfold and how the stories changed from the rosy pictures at the top but faded as the story unfolded down through the ranks' and

— Feeling the institute staff benefited:

I think there was benefit to those being interviewed—it led to formal and even more informal discussions within the institute.

— But still having some concerns:

I was inclined to dance around [sic] *the interview questions and not address them directly.*

Summary Discussion

To summarise, the professional and personal benefits included having exposure to the world of 'real life' research; extending professional understandings in terms of research, teaching and training; increasing working knowledge in a broad sense and making connections with other areas within institutes; benefiting personally as professional development and linking to personal study, with support being provided from the core team at UTS.

It was considered that institutes benefited from getting feedback from the researchers involved; providing renewed and closer connections with local industries and community agencies and an increased awareness of an industry–led system among TAFE staff.

Difficulties were initial feelings of isolation, loss of leadership and two issues which drew most comment were the understanding of the time it takes to 'do' research. Gaining commitment from staff to participate was easier when there was support and encouragement from senior staff. The other major issue was managing the workload as many staff are working at '110%'. One researcher was frustrated at not being involved in the analysis of the data. Suggested improvements related mostly to recruitment strategies with some practical housekeeping details also being mentioned.

Although some practitioners were initially tentative about doing interviews, most expressed this as a positive experience in some way. As was mentioned early in this paper each person conducts research interviews in their own style. In the analysis of the responses it was apparent that the market researcher approached the interview using a style evident in market research. The questions were delivered in a clear and direct manner with little prompting. The student advisor with social science experience on the other hand, probed deeply, using a very personal and conversational style.

Conclusion

Overall the voices of the practitioners as they recounted their experiences as Associate Researchers indicate that those experiences were positive both personally and for their institutes. The findings in relation to interview style suggests that each person brings previous professional experience to their interviewing style. This is not to say that any one style is better than any other style but rather that different styles potentially generate different responses. While there were some difficult aspects to being involved in the research, each practitioner in their own way found solutions suited to their region. What they demonstrated was that teaching and research can and do mix beneficially. While still carrying out normal work, each practitioner accepted and carried out the role of Research Associate with RCVET. The overall experience can be summed up in the words of Associate Researchers:

> *I would recommend this form of research—it was good for me to be involved. It was my first formal involvement in a project from scratch. Being involved in the development of a project was brilliant. It opened my eyes to the realities of research —it was a learning curve*, and

> *Most teachers conduct research on a daily basis. The very nature of our work includes aspects of research. So whether we are preparing lessons, conducting course evaluations, writing up reports, interviewing students, all of these skills are used. The difference in this type of research is that you tend to focus on the specific area/issue, narrow it down, carefully define it and the scrutinising process becomes a lot more intense (Associate Researcher in Melville 2002).*

Because of the small number and diversity of backgrounds there is no claim for generalisability of these findings but I do see this as a strong case for encouraging the mix of teaching practice and research practice. Clearly they are not oil and water!

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