

Teaching standards and professionalism in TAFE: prospects, possibilities and pitfalls

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Abstract

The investigation and development of professional standards for Technical and Further Education teachers is an important part of implementing current government policy in Victoria. Drawing on findings from a literature review completed as part of a project undertaken recently for the Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education, this paper explores the prospects of, and possibilities and pitfalls in, introducing professional teaching standards in TAFE. The argument is made that for standard setting initiatives to raise the status of TAFE teaching and strengthen professional practice, their purpose must be to enhance teaching and learning, not effect performance management and business improvement. Emerging understandings of teacher professional expertise form the best basis for this enhancement. Accordingly, the nature of teacher professional expertise is first examined and discussed. Two broad and contrasting perspectives on professional standards are then sketched as a backdrop to more specific analysis of some examples of professional teaching standards, and the kind of teaching and learning professional implied by these standards. The conclusion is drawn that emerging understandings of teacher professional expertise can serve as a useful guide to strengthening TAFE teacher professionalism and should serve as a central plank in any policy initiative to renew TAFE teaching through the introduction of teaching standards.

Introduction

Over the past decade, reform within the TAFE system has commonly taken place in terms of national industry standards and competency-based training and assessment. Accordingly, National Training Packages provide the standards framework for industry-specific competence, including competence for entry to teaching in TAFE. Competencies, as specified in the Australian Quality Training Framework, may not be the best basis on which to build appropriate standards of teacher performance, however. It is widely understood that in a knowledge-based economy workers must move beyond basic competence. 'For the education and training workforce this means energetic pursuit of quality beyond regulatory requirements and renewed interest in broadly based educative practice' (OTTE 2002a, p.5). A consensus would appear to be emerging with respect to the need to strengthen the profession of teaching and place greater value on good teaching. 'There is broad agreement about the importance of high quality teaching and the negative effects on learners where these skills are lacking' (OTTE 2002b, p.10).

There is considerable interest worldwide in the potential of professional teaching standards to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. This interest reflects the findings of recent research on quality teaching (Darling-Hammond 2000; Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain 2000). As Hargreaves notes, 'we have come to realize in recent years that the teacher is the ultimate key to educational change'

(1994, p.ix). A recent OECD investigation of the management of teacher demand and supply resulted in one crucial finding: teacher quality is a critical factor in determining student learning (OECD 2002a, p.8). Apparently, teachers *do* make the difference.

This paper reports on a project undertaken recently for the Victorian Office of Training and Tertiary Education (Mulcahy & Jasman 2003). The project involved investigating standards and their use in enhancing professional practice and comprised (i) a *review* of a number of international and Australian initiatives with respect to setting and applying standards, trends in the development of standards, and themes and issues relating to the kinds of standards that might make a positive contribution for teachers in the Victorian TAFE context; (ii) an *evaluation* of three broad methodological approaches to setting standards using a range of evaluative criteria. The main themes and issues identified in the review are summarized below.

Professional standards, professionalism and teacher professional expertise

As Sykes and Plastrik have it, a standard is ‘a tool for rendering appropriately precise the making of judgements and decisions in the context of shared meanings and values’ (1993, p.4). This definition emphasizes one of the central distinguishing features of a professional’s work, the making of judgements. Some key features of members of professional groups are:

that they share a set of core values, they have common identity and language and a sense of pride and belonging. Their authority derives from their knowledge and practice, and they exhibit collegial relationships which are not externally regulated. Their professional knowledge is recognized and the judgements of their peers are important to them (Ingvarson 2002a). Other features include a degree of autonomy and time for reflection (OTTE 2002b, p.8).

There are two main types of standards as applied to teaching:

The first defines the basic tasks or duties of a teacher – what a teacher is hired to do. These are the kinds of generic criteria that school administrators usually have authority to apply in appraising whether teachers are doing their basic job. ... The second are standards for good teaching specific to particular subject and curriculum fields. ... These standards are based on professional values and images of high quality learning specific to subject fields (Ingvarson 1998a, pp.32-33).

Derived in the main from the knowledge base of teaching (Ingvarson & Chadbourne 1994), the second type of standards supports the claim that teaching is a profession.

Recent research on teaching standards in Australia (Jasman 2003; Ingvarson 2002b) proposes that standards be based on understandings of the nature and development of *teacher professional expertise*. Teacher professional expertise has in the past been discussed in terms of understanding effective teaching (Dunkin & Biddle 1974) or in the literature on novice and expert teachers (Berliner 1988; Brandt 1987). However, during the 1990s professional expertise came to be described in terms of competency, competence and competencies (Jasman 1997).

More recently, and due, in part, to the perceived limitations of these descriptions, teacher professional expertise is now described in terms of highly *accomplished* practice (NBPTS 1987; ACE 2000). This description implies the importance of high level skills.

The research reported here is framed by the following formulation of teacher professional expertise drawn from a wide range of research literatures that include

teacher effectiveness and process-product research; studies of teacher thinking, action research, reflective practice and professional judgment; teacher professional development, learning and knowledge construction; and change and improvement research literature. Professional expertise is defined, by Jasman (2003, p.30), as:

the knowledge and skills that teachers have and demonstrate (theoretical, practical and pedagogical knowledge)
with regard to their attributes, dispositions, values and commitment (qualities)
to enable student learning (focus of concern on students)
through the professional judgments and decisions they make and enact (pedagogical reasoning)
taking account of the context (situational understanding)
through reflection and research on their knowledge and professional practices (action inquiry)
working with colleagues and others in various communities (collaboration), beyond the classroom (sphere of influence)
to facilitate change and innovation (change agent)
for the improvement of student learning opportunities and outcomes (improvement orientation)

Standards for teaching

The development of professional standards has proceeded with remarkable speed within a number of countries. Developments have been driven by a diverse range of factors including the demand for greater accountability, the interest in the link between quality teaching and quality learning, the concern with high quality teaching, the desire to reform education, the need to strengthen teacher professional development and the introduction of teacher performance appraisal.

Professional standards, in one form or another, have been developed in many Australian contexts. Over the past decade, Commonwealth and State / Territory governments have sponsored a number of initiatives aimed at defining the knowledge and skills needed by Australia's teachers. More recently, responsibility for the development of teaching standards has been placed with the profession. Increasingly, it was argued that teacher-generated standards be established and that the establishment of these standards would create points of reference for teachers' professionalism. 'Standards should be developed and owned and their use determined by the teaching profession. Any group charged with the responsibility of developing and implementing standards should consist of a majority of practising teachers' (AEU 2001, p.1).

These developments are in line with contemporary understandings of the constructed nature of knowledge (Glaserfield 1995) and the situated nature of learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). Research on teaching and learning over recent years has emphasized the highly context-specific nature of teaching expertise (Berliner 1992; Shulman 1987). Ingvarson (1998b, p.127), writing in the context of school teaching, argues that teaching standards 'need to be embedded in the teaching of a particular subject if they are to be valid representations of expertise and useful guides to professional development'. Similarly, Billett (2001, p.65), writing in the context of workplace learning, argues that embeddedness is one of the key characteristics of expertise.

Issues and trends in the development of standards

Some issues with respect to standards development and trends in this development that emerged from the review are:

- *Quality teaching for quality learning*: Professional teaching standards are embedded in discourses of education reform and quality teaching. It is widely claimed that these standards have the potential to support improvements in the quality of teaching and learning through engaging teachers in processes of professional learning and development.
- *High and rigorous standards*: High and rigorous standards of performance for the teaching profession are deemed necessary at all levels of performance, including entry to the profession.
- *Source of criteria for standards*: Standards aim to capture substantive knowledge about teaching and learning – what teachers need to know and be able to do to promote quality learning. The main source of criteria used in determining the content of teaching standards is *teachers' work* conceived as the application of *professional expertise* (rather than the performance of specific work roles, functions and tasks).
- *Ownership of standards with the teaching profession*: It is acknowledged that responsibility for the definition of teachers' work and the development of teaching standards lies with the teaching profession. Standards are developed by teachers themselves in collaboration with key stakeholders.
- *Generic standards are supplemented by subject- and level-specific standards*: Standards contain both generic and specific elements. Statements about teaching are developed at varying levels ranging from the highly generalized to the highly specific.
- *Developmental model of standards*: Standards are based on the premise that personal and professional growth is a developmental process. They imply a theory of teacher learning and development eg. situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). They aim to capture a 'continuum of competence' – from beginning to highly accomplished teacher.

Ingvarson summarises the trends in the development of standards in the following:

- 1 *They are developed by teachers themselves through their professional associations;*
- 2 *They aim to capture substantive knowledge about teaching and learning – what teachers really need to know and be able to do to promote learning of important subject matter;*
- 3 *They are performance-based. They describe what teachers should know and be able to do rather than listing courses that teachers should take in order to be awarded registration or certification;*
- 4 *They conceive of teachers' work as the application of expertise and values to non-routine tasks. Assessment strategies need to be capable of capturing teachers' reasoned judgements and what they actually do in authentic teaching situations;*
- 5 *Assessment of performance in the light of teaching standards is becoming one of the primary tools for ongoing professional learning and development (Ingvarson 2002b, pp.3-4).*

Perspectives on teaching standards

Writing in the context of New Zealand's educational reforms of the last decade, Sullivan (1999) compares two policy perspectives on standards development, one that is held by government ('professional standards as professional management') and one that is promoted by teachers ('professional standards for performance development'). He concludes that 'staff development from the Government perspective is rigidly tied to a set of procedures whose outcome is geared to performance management – that is,

staff appraisal and performance related pay. There is nothing professional about such procedures' (p.151). Similarly, Ingvarson (2001) distinguishes between a 'performance management' system (teaching reforms in the UK) and a 'professional certification' system (teaching reforms in the USA).

Performance management and accountability

A performance management rationale has as its aim the direct improvement of organizational and system functioning and thereby organizational and system performance. The performance management view of standards is widely held in countries where it is conventional that government or employers set standards for teaching. It reflects a view of *standards as performance outcomes* and underwrites the development of performance management or accountability standards:

These refer to managerial requirements for periodic appraisal for satisfactory performance of teaching duties for retention or dismissal decisions. The foundation for these standards rests in the concept of the contract as a legal document – setting out what a teacher is hired to do. (The emphasis here is on student welfare / public safeguard – usually minimum competency type standards) (Ingvarson 2002b, p.7).

Professional learning and development

An alternative approach to standards development involves recognizing the importance of personal and individual development, and placing high value on the capacity of individuals and groups to identify their learning and development needs. This approach reflects a view of *standards as developmental processes* and underwrites the development of standards for professional learning and development. Standards for professional learning and development are 'based on research and professional knowledge, visions of highly accomplished practice, clear dimensions of what teachers should get better at' (Ingvarson 2002b, p.7).

Standards as developmental processes: Case examples

The most comprehensive undertaking to define professional standards for teachers has been that of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in the USA. Initiated in 1987, the NBPTS manages a process of certification of teachers of high quality and establishes standards-setting committees to develop standards in specific teaching areas or fields. NBPTS standards begin by acknowledging the complexity of teaching and the inadequacy of accounts of teaching performance that reduce teaching to sets and sub-sets of discrete competencies or skills (Doecke & Gill 2000, p.9). They present a vision of teaching based on five core propositions:

- ❖ teachers are committed to students and their learning;
- ❖ teachers know the subjects they teach and how to teach those subjects to students;
- ❖ teachers are responsible for managing and monitoring student learning;
- ❖ teachers think systematically about their practice and learn from experience;
- ❖ teachers are members of learning communities (NBPTS 1987).

The professional certification model is, *par excellence*, a developmental model of teacher learning and development. For example, there are reports of teachers undergoing significant professional renewal through engaging in the processes of certification (Haynes 1995). The standards are cast in terms of *actions* that teachers

take to advance student learning and incorporate the essential knowledge, skills, dispositions, and commitments that allow them to practise at a high level. Elements of the standards are described in continuous prose in an effort to create meaningful images of good teaching practice. The two brief case examples that follow have been chosen to illustrate how professional teaching standards have been developed in The United States and Australia.

Case example 1: NBPTS Career and Technical Education Standards

The NBPTS Career and Technical Education Standards (NBPTS 2001) are targeted at students aged 11-18+. They are organized around the effect of teacher actions on student learning and are divided into four categories:

1. *Teacher actions that create the conditions for productive student learning;*
2. *Teacher actions that directly advance student learning in the classroom;*
3. *Teacher actions that help students transition to work and adult roles;*
4. *Teacher actions that indirectly support student learning through professional development and outreach initiatives.*

Developed by a standards committee for this certification field, they are specified using a two-part format of standard statement and elaboration. An extract from the first of the thirteen standards is provided in the box below:

<p style="text-align: center;">Box 1</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Standard 1: Knowledge of students</p> <p><i>Accomplished career and technical educators are dedicated to advancing the learning and well-being of all students. They personalize their instruction and apply knowledge of human development to best understand and meet their students' needs.</i></p> <p>In addition to bringing a wide variety of skills, talents, and abilities to the classroom, most students are also greatly concerned about their future. Therefore, the career and technical education classroom is centered not only around student need, interests, and academic preparation but also around future aspirations, vocations, workplace values, and life skills. In order to create a learning environment to address both the commonalities and the differences that characterize their students, teachers are well versed in areas of particular importance to adolescents and young adults, including the requirements of local businesses and industries and the potential availability of work; the workplace environment of the businesses in question; and the need for, desirability of, and availability of further educational opportunities. To use this knowledge effectively, teachers are skilled at ...</p>

Case example 2: STELLA

The project, Standards for Teachers of English Language and Literacy in Australia (STELLA), began in 1999 as a three-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council. The purpose of the project was to develop subject specific standards for primary and secondary teachers of English that acknowledge the complexity of teaching. Teacher panels were set up in different states to develop the STELLA standards. Accordingly, they were derived from panel discussions about criteria for good teaching and narratives about good teaching (Gill 1999, p.74). In line with the work of the NBPTS, the STELLA Standards Framework (<http://www.stella.org.au/>) consists of statements of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do. Standards statements are grouped under three broad headings: (i) Professional knowledge; (ii) Professional practice; and (iii) Professional engagement. Each statement contains a *core*

description (of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do) and *key words* and *focus questions* for reflection and discussion. The key words identify *attributes* that can be used to describe accomplished teaching. An extract from the standards is provided in the following table.

Table 1: Extract from STELLA: Standards statement 3.2 – teachers continue to learn

3. Professional Engagement	
3.2 Teachers continue to learn	
Standards statement (core descriptions of what accomplished teachers of English and Literacy believe, know and are able to do)	Key words & Focus questions (For reflection and discussion)
<p>3.2 Teachers continue to learn</p> <p>Accomplished English / Literacy teachers recognise that the context of their teaching is continually evolving. They reflect on, analyse and are able to articulate all aspects of their professional practice, constantly reviewing and refining their teaching to improve students’ learning opportunities, and searching for answers to challenging pedagogical questions. They seek opportunities to discuss the effectiveness of their teaching with colleagues, students, parents and care givers.</p> <p>With their own learning goals in mind, accomplished English / literacy teachers pursue new knowledge through professional renewal activities such as ...</p>	<p>Reflection</p> <p>How does the teacher maintain and further develop his / her personal and professional growth?</p> <p>Critique</p> <p>To what extent does the teacher contribute to and learn from current debates about teaching and learning?</p> <p>How open is the teacher in questioning and evaluating classroom, school and wider literacy practices?</p> <p>Development</p> <p>What professional learning goals does the teacher have? What opportunities are taken up to learn from courses, colleagues and the workplace?</p>

Prospects, possibilities and pitfalls in standards reform

Any attempt to establish professional standards for teaching carries along with it a (re) definition of teaching and the teaching professional. It could be argued that the pitfalls are plentiful and the prospects few. Standards statements promote particular ways of thinking and doing teaching and teacher professionalism. Arguably, conventional competency approaches to standards where the ends are chosen first (outcomes) and the means (pedagogy) adapted to those ends, generate a technical / rational account of teaching which can only serve to reduce teacher professionalism. To be valid, teaching standards must attempt to capture the complexity of the work teachers do. Process statements are appropriate here. These statements do not work to a precise specification as outcomes statements strive to do. The case examples above provide useful pointers. They go well beyond the conventional competency approach.

The standards-based reform movement is set within discourses of quality teaching and educational reform, including reform to teacher education. In the United States, this ‘movement began as a response to a perceived crisis in the educational system, a crisis which, it was argued, if not corrected, would jeopardize the economy’ (Petrosky & Delandshere 2000, p.30). It is oriented to the systemic alignment of curriculum standards, professional teaching standards, accreditation standards, and assessment standards. As Beyer has it, teaching and teacher preparation is again being positioned

as something like a science: ‘At the core of this agenda is a politically enticing but conceptually misplaced view of teaching and schooling that harkens back to earlier eras when a search for certainty and predictability was mounted (2002, p.240).

While standards-based reform is not as advanced as in the US, recent government initiatives in Australia such as the current move towards professional certification (Doecke & Gill 2000, p.8), suggest that the standards movement is well underway. Further to the above, the danger of this reform movement, like the ‘objectives’ and ‘competencies’ movements before it, is that teaching standards will be developed ‘outside’ teachers and consequently not connect with their cultures and life-worlds. Standards may well serve to standardize rather than support teaching (Bathmaker 2000). Set within discourses of economic accountability and performance management, they may also fail to take up the central questions that concern education. For Beyer, education must be infused with ‘critical scrutiny about social purposes, future possibilities, economic realities, and moral directions’ (2002, p.240). Teachers need to be guided by a ‘theoretical and normative framework that allows the development of a theory of education as well as a theory of teaching’ (ibid., p.244).

Conclusions

The ‘trick’ in standards design is achieving *clarity* about the purpose for the standards. A ‘growth’ intention does not sit comfortably with an accountability intention. Traditionally, it has been government policy or employer initiative that has precipitated the change to professional teaching standards. Certainly in TAFE, seldom has the change seemed to come from the system itself; seldom has there been an opportunity for TAFE teachers to define and demarcate the boundaries of their work and the standards that might support the further development of this work. The importance of having the ownership of professional standards with the teaching profession is now widely recognized, however. ‘For any statements of professional teaching standards to be authentic, they will need to be defined by teachers – collectively and collegially – to provide insight into the nature of successful teaching processes as currently practised’ (Teacher Education Review Taskforce 2001, p.6). Currently, TAFE teaching professionals are required to comply with externally mandated national standards frameworks through competency-based training, National Training Packages and the AQTF. Standards that are not externally regulated and that capture substantive knowledge about TAFE teaching may provide a platform for professional growth and change. Among other things, strengthening TAFE teacher professionalism demands careful management of the tension between the pitfalls and possibilities in introducing professional standards. The case examples given above may be a good guide to this management. Emerging understandings of teacher professional expertise can also act as a useful guide to strengthening TAFE teacher professionalism and should serve as a central plank in any policy initiative to renew TAFE teaching through the introduction of teaching standards.

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