

Conceptions of teaching in a dual sector institution: implications for staff development

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Abstract

Staff development processes and practices in a dual sector institution are complex as, in addition to meeting the separate needs of higher education academics and TAFE teachers, there is an imperative to foster collaborative effort between TAFE and higher education. At VU, there is increasing recognition that there are different conceptions of teaching held by teachers within and across the University's TAFE and Higher Education divisions, and that a better understanding of these differences will inform the development of institution-wide professional development strategies. Recent research suggests that staff development practices in tertiary institutions will need to be conceptualised in terms of institutional work-based approaches that locate workers as learners.

This paper describes a project that explores conceptions of teaching held by TAFE teaching professionals in a dual sector institution. The project builds on extensive work undertaken to identify the conceptions of teaching held by academics in Higher Education. It seeks to develop a complementary study into TAFE teaching that will inform staff and curriculum development processes in a dual sector institution. It complements work undertaken by one of the investigators, R. Hallett, whose PhD project is a study of the working knowledge of Higher Education academics.

Introduction

On the one hand their status is derived from their claim to expertise in the working knowledge of an occupation. Yet their status as professional educator is derived from their ability to implement educational practices that in some senses work against the kind of knowledge expertise they bring to the vocational learning project (Chappell C 2000).

This paper explores the contradiction that exists at the core of professional identity for TAFE teachers identified by Chappell, above, through an examination of the working knowledge of 15 TAFE teaching professionals at Victoria University (VU), Melbourne, Victoria. Specifically, it reports a preliminary exploration of the conceptions of teaching held by these TAFE teaching professionals. We seek to discern whether the working knowledge of TAFE teaching professionals in the study reflects the re-configuration of concepts of knowledge that are being identified by educational researchers who are plotting the emergence of new knowledge forms emerging in the postmodern world (see for example, (Senge 1994; Hager 1997; Marginson 1997). By deconstructing the roles of TAFE teaching professionals through their conceptions of teaching, we seek to draw implications for professional development processes and practices in a dual-sector tertiary institution such as VU.

We believe that the findings of such research will have impact not only on dual sector institutions, where higher education academics and TAFE teaching professionals are in close proximity, but it also on 'stand alone' institutions in either the higher education or VET sectors because of the increasing pressure on even these institutions to collaborate through the development of articulation and credit transfer arrangements. This paper reports emerging themes from preliminary studies into the working knowledge of the TAFE teaching professionals in this study, compares these to what is known about conceptions of teaching and learning held by higher education academics, and draws some preliminary conclusions about the implications for professional development process and practice.

TAFE teaching

The contradiction in TAFE work identified above emerges as a result of 'new discourses' around vocationalism that have evolved in the wake of growing recognition that work is now defined in terms of 'knowledge' work' (Gee 1996). In this construction, TAFE teachers, as agents of 'new' vocationalism, are positioned along with the VET sector as 'knowledge users' rather than 'knowledge producers' (Kinsman 1992). Higher education, in this construction, 'produces' knowledge while VET 'uses' it (Chappell 2000). Such a construction reflects a binary -in discursive traditions around the new vocationalism, with the VET sector reliant on higher education to produce and, via research, develop knowledge so that it can find ways for the knowledge to be used. In this tradition, discipline knowledge is the basis of the knowledge production process for higher education academics. There is thus a strong emphasis in this tradition on performativity and application for VET professionals with the role defined in terms of work related skills. In this construction, VET teaching is defined by the practitioner's knowledge of the relevant practice area and, particularly, through recent contact with it.

However, this focus on practitioner knowledge is overlaid by an educational discourse that has manifested through progressive mandating? of educational qualifications for TAFE teachers. Since 1974, 'there has been a steady increase in the number of full time teachers in TAFE constructed as both vocational experts and professional teachers and this shift has represented a significant cultural shift in the cultural identity of TAFE' (Chappell 2000). Thus, for example, TAFE teachers at VU, as well as elsewhere in the national system, are required to have a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training as a minimal requirement. There is also currently pressure for recognition of a Diploma of VET as a minimal teaching requirement for VET teaching professionals. The result is that 'professionalism' for VET teachers is now defined in terms of educational qualifications both in Australia and internationally (Mitchell 2003).

Teaching practice increasingly reflects that paradox that the educational discourse has delivered: vocational knowledge turned into 'teachable' (often classroom-based) knowledge which in many cases is fixed and disciplinary-based. This is at odds with the lifelong learning discourse that positions vocational or working knowledge (of the field of practice) as ever changing and highly 'performative' (Boud & Solomon 2001, Garrick & Rhodes 2000). Teaching practices that revolve around the idea of bringing the 'real world' into the classroom include, for example, site visits, field placements, visiting speakers and simulations of workplaces in various guises, have arisen from the educational discourse overlay. More radical approaches where work *is* the

curriculum remain in the minority – although there is more evidence of these approaches in the VET sector than any other approach in the Australian context (Boud & Solomon 2000). The challenge for TAFE teachers, then, is to develop educational practices for vocational learning that better integrate currency with notions of performativity and the transience of knowledge forms (Chappell 2000).

It is likely that TAFE teachers at VU will hold conceptions of teaching that reflect the ideas about vocationalism that pre date the influence of the educational discourse, paradoxical positions that reflect the influence of the educational discourse overlay, and notions of performativity that reflect more recent elements of the education discourse in terms of lifelong learning and the transient nature of knowledge. This paper links these ideas to professional development processes and practices that can/should operate within institutions such as VU.

Professional development

Staff development processes and practices in a dual sector institution are complex as, in addition to meeting the separate needs of higher education academics and TAFE teachers, there is an additional imperative to foster collaborative effort between TAFE and higher education (Hallett 2000; Wheelahan 2000). At VU, there is increasing recognition that there are different conceptions of teaching held by teachers within and across the University's TAFE and Higher Education divisions, and that a better understanding of these differences will inform the development of institution-wide professional development strategies.

VET sector approaches to staff development reflect conceptualisation of staff development in terms of organisational learning models both in Australia and internationally (Heikkinen 2003; Mitchell 2003). However, empirical research into student learning in the VET sector, on VET teachers' conceptions of learning and teaching that could underpin these models, is scarce by comparison with the body of research in these areas for Higher Education (Ferris 1994). Preliminary research in this area suggests that there are varying conceptions of what constitutes teaching and learning within VET (Chappell C 2000) – especially in how Competency Based Training (CBT) is conceptualised by TAFE and non TAFE teachers (Lowrie, Smith et al. 1999). We could find nothing recent, however, that examines the conceptions of TAFE teachers and none that examines the conceptions of TAFE teachers in a dual sector institution. Current investigations into the suitability of professional development models in the VET sector are conceptualised as 'stand alone' – or specific to the VET sector overall. They do not consider the challenges that arise in dual sector institutions for meeting the professional development needs of TAFE and Higher Education staff who are often working together.

Higher Education staff development processes and practices are informed by empirical research into student learning (Samuelowicz 1992; Ramsden and Griffith Institute for Higher Education. 1994; Trigwell 1996 (b); Putnam 1998; Trigwell 1998), and, more recently, academics' understandings of teaching (Martin 1991; Samuelowicz 1992; Prosser 1994; Ramsden and Griffith Institute for Higher Education. 1994; Feldman 1995; Prosser M. 1998; Putnam 1998). This empirical research largely comprises phenomenographic studies that seek to uncover conceptions held by learners – in this case, higher education academics learning about how students learn. In these studies, conceptions of teaching are linked to conceptions

of learning and, from these, assumptions about how teachers can be encouraged to develop their skills are developed. In summary, this research has established that teachers hold qualitatively different conceptions of teaching and learning and therefore approach their teaching in qualitatively different ways.

Approaches to staff development in higher education have moved away from 'technicist' models - where there is an emphasis on centrally delivered activities - towards models that adopt organisational learning methodologies (Schön 1987; Duke 1992; Brew 1995; Brookfield 1995; Cranton 1996; Nicholls 2000; Martin 2001) largely as a result of these studies.

This current paper reports the preliminary findings of a phenomenographic study into TAFE teachers' understandings of teaching.

The study

The study has taken, as a starting point, five conceptions of teaching held by higher education academics described by Martin, Prosser, Trigwell, Leukenhausen and Ramsden (2001). These conceptions were derived through analysis of qualitative data using the phenomenographic method. In this method, transcriptions are analysed so that decontextualised categories of description of a particular phenomena are developed. In this way, the experiences of a particular phenomenon are considered for analysis (Booth & Marton 1997). According to Martin *et al*, higher education academics' conceptions of teaching fall into five categories of description:

Conception A: Teacher focused, teacher activity with the intention of transferring information to the students.

The approach is one in which the teacher adopts a teacher-focused strategy with the intention of transmitting information about the discipline. It is presumed that students do not need to be active in the teaching/learning process. The focus of student activity is on demonstrating discipline-based facts.

Conception B: Teacher focused, student activity with the intention of transferring information to students.

The approach is one in which the teacher adopts a teacher-focused strategy with the intention of transferring information to students. It is presumed that students do need to be active in the teaching/learning process, but the focus of the activity is on building students' understanding of the subject matter through working within the predetermined framework structures and introducing student activity around these structures.

Conception C: Teacher focused, student activity with the intention of students acquiring concepts of the discipline.

This approach is one in which the teacher adopts a teacher focused strategy with the intention of helping students to acquire the concepts of the syllabus. The focus of the activity is on building students understanding of the subject mater through working within the pre determined framework structures and introducing student activity around these structures.

Conception D: Student focused, student activity with the intention of students developing their own conceptions.

This approach is one in which the teacher adopts a student focused strategy with the intention of assisting students to develop their own conceptions of the subject matter. The focus of the student activity is on elaborating and extending students' understanding of the subject matter by employing discipline frameworks of concepts in tasks in which the framework is seen as a resource.

Conception E: Student focused, student activity with the intention of students changing their conceptions.

This approach is one in which the teacher adopts a student focused strategy with the intention of helping students to change their conceptions of the phenomena they are investigating. The focus of student activity is on students restructuring their current worldview by interacting with subject material in a way that challenges their currently held conceptions so that they restructure and change these conceptions (Martin et al 2001, p. 20).

The structural relationships between the categories can be summarised as:

Information transfer: Conceptions A & B

Concept acquisition: Conception C

Conceptual development: Conception D

Conceptual change: Conception E

The first two categories (*information transfer* and *concept acquisition*), represent *teacher focused* approaches to teaching and learning, while the last two represent *student focused* approaches.

These categories, above, are similar to ones emerging from a parallel study into academic's conceptions of teaching that is also being conducted at VU. It is clear from preliminary work done in that study that higher education academics are interested in the connection between teaching and research and the 'administrative' aspects of the academic role, and that these inter connections create tensions between components of work for higher education academics at VU.

Preliminary Findings

A phenomenographical analysis of 5 transcriptions of TAFE teachers' views about teaching and learning has yielded some preliminary categories of description. These categories of description are:

Conception A: Teacher directed activity, vocational issues narrowly defined

This approach is one where the teacher adopts a 'technicist' approach to what is to be learned. The focus is on identifying learning outcomes in terms of competencies and teaching them according to the prescriptions of the Training Packages. It is a lock step process. Discipline knowledge is utilised where and when specified, but its connection to the field of practice is not explicit or sophisticated.

Conception B: Teacher focused, but awareness of demands beyond narrow vocationalism especially those related to disciplinary knowledge.

In this approach, the teacher sees their role in terms of application of Training Packages or prescribed curricula. This is different from above as teachers see the process as involving the teaching of discipline- based knowledge that is taught in the

classroom as the primary means of achieving learning outcomes. There is a focus on classroom management issues as a major element of teaching practice.

Conception C: Teacher focused, integration of discipline knowledge (theory) with field of practice (practice) seen as important.

This approach is one where the teacher sees the complexity of the teaching task in terms of the student's present and future needs. Teaching involves struggling to get students to see the value of the learning process. This is different from the above as there is a focus on trying to get students to see that what they will learn now will be of value in the future. Discipline knowledge is seen as important as knowledge of the target field of practice. Teachers recognise that classroom management and discipline issues arise because students don't see the relevance of the present to the future.

Conception D: Student focused, awareness of field of practice driving teaching process, discipline knowledge supports this.

In this approach, the teacher tries to utilise their own experiences or the experiences of others in the target field of practice. This is different from the above, because teachers attempt to interpret the field of practice in the classroom through engaging a range of practices that bring in the 'real world'. The teacher tailors underpinning knowledge where possible (given time demands/skills, etc).

Conception E: Student focused, experiential learning drives process, with integration of discipline knowledge.

In this approach, teaching is about integrating theory and practice with conscious efforts to make discipline based knowledge 'relevant' to the area of practice. There is a greater reliance on experience in the field of practice than on discipline-based knowledge. Where discipline based knowledge is used, it is consciously and routinely adapted for instructional purposes.

The structural relationships that arise from this preliminary analysis are summarised as such:

Vocationalism as practice with minimal theory: Conceptions A & B

Vocationalism as practice with theoretical focus: Conception C

Vocationalism as practice focused, with theoretical integration: Conception D

Vocationalism as integrated theory and practice: Conception E

These preliminary findings suggest that there is a strong relationship for TAFE teachers between the field of practice that acts as a frame of reference for teaching and discipline knowledge that complements the practice area.

Conclusion

Although this is a preliminary study, its findings suggest that the professional development needs of TAFE teaching professionals focus on the connection between the field of practice area and the discipline/subject areas that constitute 'underpinning knowledge'.

Professional development strategies will need to focus on the development of conceptual frameworks that make sense to TAFE teachers.

We anticipate that the five conceptions identified will be 'tested' in light of data to be gathered from another ten interviews planned for this study.

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