Training Packages and the AQTF: freedom to move or components of a compliance-driven straitjacket?

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Abstract

This paper reports on a PhD research project being undertaken through the Faculty of Education, Deakin University. Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) form part of the ruling relations of VET, but how do they operate in practice? Do they provide frameworks within which training professionals are free to use judgement and respond in innovative ways to local learning and assessment contexts? Do they impose rigid 'guidelines' within which the decision-making authority of practitioners over appropriate practices is displaced by that of auditors, constraining creativity and creating pressures towards conformity? Or does their impact vary, depending on how they are interpreted and who is doing the interpreting? My PhD research explores issues relating to the use of Training Packages in workbased learning. Interview data suggests that, in practice, different training organisations respond very differently to a regulatory framework that aims to achieve national consistency. Some practitioners describe working in a compliance-driven environment, in which their ability to meet the needs of learners is stifled by standardised training and assessment practices imposed by Training Packages and the AQTF. This view is reflected in phrases such as 'you're not allowed to…', and 'you always feel uneasy because you've got AQTF compliance, inspections, auditors'. In contrast, other practitioners talk about having freedom to design learning and assessment programs for their particular target group and context, providing they stay within broad guidelines that guarantee national recognition of qualifications they issue. This view is reflected in comments such as 'it just leaves it open … to be as creative and flexible as you like', and 'It just gives us *freedom'*. This paper explores the proposition that the impact of these abstract and generalised texts is influenced by local interpretations, and it considers the role that organisational culture plays in determining these interpretations.

Introduction

The starting point for my research project is the sense of disjuncture I experience as a VET practitioner dealing with the way language is used in national Training Packages and related texts such as the AQTF, and the impact this language has when these texts are used to support workplace learning and assessment. As the fieldwork for this research project progressed, a number of generative themes began to emerge. In particular, using language as my entry point brought into view questions about the status of Training Packages and the AQTF, and their perceived impact on the professional authority and autonomy of VET practitioners.

My analysis of power relationships within VET is informed by the work of Canadian sociologist Dorothy E. Smith (1987, 1990, 1999). The regulatory framework of the Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector is comprised of a series of official national texts which include Training Packages, the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) (KPA Consulting 2004, p.11). These texts have been described as being 'intimately

intertwined' and in 'a symbiotic relationship' (Schofield & McDonald 2004, p.8). I argue that, taken together, these texts represent what Dorothy Smith described as a 'complex of organised practices' that establish the 'ruling relations' of VET.

> "Relations of ruling" is a concept that grasps power, organization, direction, and regulation as more pervasively structured than can be expressed in traditional concepts provided by the discourses of power. ... A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms. It is an *extralocal* mode of ruling (Smith 1987, p.3).

Training Packages and the AQTF take activities at the level of the local and particular and transcribe them into abstract and generalised forms. Within VET competency is defined as including knowledge and skill, and sometimes also attitude (Smith & Keating 2003, p.135). For an individual employee's performance in a local workplace to be recognised by the award of an AQF qualification, it must be documented in terms of the relevant Training Package competency standards and verified by a nationally recognised assessor. The assessor themselves must hold specified Training Package competencies relating both to the assessment process and also to the industry content that is being assessed. And the assessment process must be documented to comply with AQTF standards. In this process, Training Package competency standards act as an abstract and generalised representation of the knowledge, skill and attitudes required by individual employees at the local workplace level, and the AQTF acts as an abstract and generalised representation of local training and assessment practices.

Training Packages and the AQTF establish:

> ... a textual mode of action which obscures the presence of individual employers, instructors, and students as the living subjects of the instructional process. Their presence is displaced by an objectified system of curriculum planning and implementation in which documents replace individuals as constituents of social action (Jackson 1995, p.166).

Nancy Jackson described competency based training (CBT) as a 'tool of administrative rather than instructional reform' (Jackson 1993, p.47). In CBT systems documented competency standards are seen as being 'objective', and they become the only authorised basis for decision making. In contrast, practitioner perspectives are seen as representing 'vested interests', and the authority of practitioners to make decisions based on their professional judgement is subordinated and displaced (Jackson 1995). Using the concept of 'ruling relations' as part of the framework for my exploration of language and power within VET, I found that questions about the positioning of VET practitioners and the displacement of their professional expertise and authority emerged strongly in the fieldwork. VET practitioners participating in this study reported widely varied experiences of the impact of Training Packages and the AQTF, ranging from those who reported having almost total freedom to exercise their professional authority, to others who described the displacement of their authority as educators in favour of the authority of auditors.

Research method

Institutional ethnography is an approach to social research which is used to explore the ruling relations by discovering 'how things work' with the aim to 'explicate the actual social processes and practices organizing people's everyday experience from a standpoint in the everyday world' (Smith 1987, pp.147 & 151). Introduced by Dorothy Smith, institutional ethnography has been described as 'an emergent mode of inquiry, always subject to revision and the improvisation required by new applications' (DeVault & McCoy 2001, p.752). The fieldwork for my PhD project

was informed in part by institutional ethnography. Interviews were conducted with VET practitioners who currently play, or have played, a role in implementing Training Packages to support workplace learning and assessment. The Australian VET sector is 'broad and diverse', encompassing a wide range of industry and skill areas, organisation types, learning environments, and serving a diverse student population (National Centre for Vocational Education Research 2001, p.3). Within this, the role of VET practitioner itself can be widely diverse, operating across a range of contexts and learning environments (Chappell 2003). As national texts, Training Packages and the AQTF apply across the full range of contexts and participants within VET. A key goal of my PhD research is to explore the impact of the standardised and formal language typically used in these texts. I set out to build a picture of the ruling relations of VET in the widely different contexts in which they operate. To support this, interviewees were selected on the basis of a diversity of experience, roles and contexts, and the varied perspectives they could offer, rather than being selected in an attempt to establish a representative sample (DeVault & McCoy 2001, pp.757-761).

A total of 28 VET practitioners were interviewed, with professional experience in a wide diversity of roles which included: training and assessment (both accredited and non-accredited); teaching; lecturing; RTO management; Training Package development and review; VET system administration and regulation; AQTF auditing; provision of consultancy services and advice on Training Package and AQTF issues; and VET research and consultation. The contexts in which interviewees worked included: private and enterprise Registered Training Organisations (RTOs); publicly funded TAFE colleges; individual consultancies; industry organisations; and regulatory agencies. They encompassed a wide range of industry Training Packages, and worked in learning environments which included: on-the-job training and assessment; face-to-face training in a training room or classroom; flexible and online delivery; and Recognition of Prior Learning (in some areas known as 'Skills Recognition'). While most interviewees were located in regional and metropolitan Western Australia, a small number of interviews were conducted with VET practitioners from South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, and the ACT.

In a trend noted by Smith and Keating (2003, p.230), a number of practitioners in this study moved confidently across a range of roles and contexts. Of particular interest to this paper was the fact that several interviewees were, at the time of interview, working part-time in both publicly and privately funded RTOs, and were able to comment about the implementation of Training Packages and the AQTF in these different contexts.

The interviews themselves were loosely structured around a number of broad questions developed from a combination of the initial literature review and informal discussions with other VET practitioners. Interviewees were provided with some broad questions in advance, but rather than using these as the basis for a formal question-and-answer interview structure, they were used to indicate areas of interest. The interview approach used in institutional ethnography has been described as 'talking with people' (DeVault & McCoy 2001, p.756), and consistent with this approach, each interview in this study was conducted more as a conversation, with interviewees invited to talk broadly about their views on, use of, and experiences with the language of Training Packages in workplace learning and assessment. This approach was described by one interviewee in the following terms:

... we're sitting around with a cup of coffee and we're discussing things (Mark).

Institutional ethnography uses open-ended interview techniques, with later interviews exploring avenues and threads that emerged in previous ones (DeVault & McCoy 2001, p.757). The first few interviews in my study focused largely on questions relating to the language of Training Packages, and the data suggested a trend of emerging practitioner resistance to this language. Practitioners working in a range of different roles and contexts, with a range of Training Packages and a diverse population of learners, identified the language of Training Packages as problematic, and described it as being disempowering and alienating for learners. Of particular interest here was the practice adopted by some RTOs of providing all learners and assessment candidates with complex documentation including unedited and uncontextualised units of competency. Following this thread led to some simple, some might say obvious, questions: Why would VET practitioners adopt a practice of issuing program materials in a language and format which they themselves identify as being inappropriate for their learning contexts or learner groups? Why not develop learning and assessment materials using language and format that is appropriate for the learners who will be working with it? Exploring these questions exposed an extremely generative theme. Initially I regarded this emerging theme as related to, but separate from, my primary research problematic; but as my research progressed I came to understand that issues relating to the perceived impact of Training Packages and the AQTF on the professional authority of VET practitioners are central to my analysis of language and power in VET.

Findings and discussion

Some VET practitioners reported that they don't use the language of Training Packages. While they make Training Package units of competency available to those learners who wish to read them, their learning and assessment materials are contextualised, and it is possible for learners to complete entire VET qualifications without ever encountering unedited units of competency. Explanations offered for this approach varied. Some practitioners argued that customising materials to meet the needs of participants is simply good practice. Others expressed the view that there is a formal requirement that units of competency be presented to learners in language that is meaningful to them.

> There is a requirement for the RTO, or the assessor in particular, to provide the candidate with information in *plain English*, commensurate with the language of the workplace, as to what it is they are going to be assessed on ... There is *no* requirement for them to provide a copy of the Training Package. And if they do that they should be slapped, and shot ... because it says 'clear information'. And if it's not clear to the student, what it means and what it's used for, it's not clear information (Cheryl).

In contrast to this approach, other VET practitioners reported that they consider the language of Training Packages to be inappropriate for their context, but they use it because they believe they are compelled to do so.

> As part of the AQTF requirements for the college, they have to be given the elements and performance criteria up front, when coming on board to that unit (Kate).

Further exploring these different approaches revealed very different perspectives on the status of Training Packages and the AQTF, and their impact on VET practitioners' freedom to exercise their professional judgement. Some interviewees talked about individual auditors applying very different interpretations of the AQTF standards.

> This is what I mean about the goalposts. One RTO can do it their way, why can't another RTO? Is it the *provider*? How come compliance suddenly shifts - what is compliant in one area is not in another? One of the things the auditor said was 'We don't talk about marks anymore.' ... He said 'We don't talk about exams either.' And yet he had done a validation of an RTO only a couple of months earlier where he cheerfully accepted that they used marks, they used exams (Renee).

This concern about inconsistencies in auditing also emerged in the recent national review of AQTF implementation, which reported that 'for many RTOs it was presented as the paramount or threshold issue for the review' (KPA Consulting 2004, p.41). Yet perceived inconsistencies in the interpretations applied by auditors is not sufficient on its own to explain the strongly varied perspectives and experiences being reported in this study. The interview data also suggests that individual RTOs themselves are interpreting and applying the AQTF in very different ways.

Training Packages and the AQTF as constraints
Some interviewees were highly critical of Training Packages and the AQTF, and/or the way they are being implemented. Of these interviewees, a small number described these texts as imposing significant constraints on their freedom to make professional decisions at the local level.

> … to me, the AQTF language is broad and open to interpretation. Which could be a good thing, except in our case it seems to be interpreted by people in authority in an incredibly narrow way, and making *our* life extremely difficult. And there doesn't seem to be any way of challenging the system, or there's no appeal process or anything like that. So we've felt very oppressed by it. Because we were told over and over and over by our management we could lose our RTO status. One area of the college … almost had a near miss … and it was a *very real threat*. Even *now* we're under a threat ... You just feel a lot of pressure, and you're backed into a corner as a lecturer. And I've felt that much more since this AQTF and the auditing and everything, than I've *ever* felt before. The Training Package started to make me feel a little bit 'Oh God' - you know. But when you're teaching you can be creative, and you can still teach what you teach, it doesn't matter. But then when you're starting to be audited down to every dot on the 'i' and every cross on the 't', then you start to get a bit panicky about it (Louise).

Within the general perception of the AQTF as a constraint, there were a number of specific issues identified. A number of practitioners argued that the AQTF imposes a regulatory requirement that they provide complex documentation using language that they consider to be inappropriate to the learners with whom they are working.

> ... the whole AQTF thing that you've got to give them with their right of appeals and I mean, now I'm giving students up front programs of work, rights of appeal, assessments - it's nearly an inch thick per student. And they look at it and it means *nothing* to them. (Fiona).

Other specific issues raised at interview included the perception that AQTF implementation and audit reflects narrow interpretations which impose bureaucratic procedures for processes such as documenting ongoing contact with learners and trainees, ensuring consistency in assessment, and offering prospective clients the opportunity to have existing skills recognised. In each case, interviewees argued that particular processes were being imposed which represented only one of a number of possible approaches to achieving compliance. For example, one practitioner expressed concern about narrow interpretation of the AQTF requirement that assessment strategies be validated 'at least annually' (ANTA 2001, p.19). At audit, the practice of conducting *ongoing* validation of all assessment strategies and tools was questioned by an auditor who expected to see documentary evidence of one major, formal validation and moderation event held once every 12 months. Similarly, interviewees expressed concern about narrow interpretation of the AQTF

requirements applying to the qualifications for trainers and assessors. The relevant standard currently provides for RTO staff to either hold the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, or demonstrate 'equivalence', or work under supervision (ANTA 2001, p.17). In the words of one interviewee:

> ... where it says that you must have Certificate IV or work under the supervision of - most people would just read the top line of it and say 'You must have Cert IV, it says you must have Certificate IV' (Graham).

Two interviewees described cases where extensive experience in education and training, combined with postgraduate qualifications in education, was judged to be insufficient basis on which to claim 'equivalence' to the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.

Training Packages and the AQTF as freedom
In contrast to the perception that the regulatory framework of VET imposes constraints, other interviewees talked about Training Packages and the AQTF providing freedom to make local decisions. This approach is reflected in the following quote.

> It was actually really an easy process for us to become an RTO, because a lot of the requirements we already had in place. Because we work in [a regulated industry], we had to cross our 't's' and dot our 'i's' anyway ... it's enabled us to train and give qualifications for *our* people how *we* want to do it, and not have an external RTO say 'Well you've got to do it like *this*, and you've got to do it like *this* ... Plus we're going to come in and audit you two times a year too, to make sure that you're conforming.' You know, they have to do that because of the partnership arrangements. It just gives us *freedom*. We actually find it probably gives us more *freedom* than we would have had working with an RTO (Julia).

Those who spoke about Training Packages and the AQTF from this perspective talked about these texts providing a framework to meet the needs of learners and assessment candidates, providing a competitive advantage for individual RTOs, allowing a wide range of interpretation, and providing assurances that compliant RTOs are able to provide the services they offer. These interviewees did generally not share the view that there is a requirement for complex and inappropriate learning and assessment materials, arguing instead that good practice requires all materials to be contextualised and relevant to the needs of particular groups of learners.

Different readings of ruling texts
As the interviews progressed, it became clear that individual VET practitioners were operating with very different perceptions and experiences of the requirements and impact of Training Packages and the AQTF. This points to the different readings achieved by readers who engage with and enact these texts in different locations (Kinsman 1997, p.222). Everyday training and assessment practices enacted at local workplace level are shaped by institutional processes that have their origins in the social relations of the national VET system. Official regulatory texts such as Training Packages and the AQTF are neither passive nor neutral: they actively organise and coordinate local activities (Kinsman 1997, p.216). Organisational knowledge is textually mediated, and work is coordinated, organised, and made accountable through text-based practices; and the *way* these texts are enacted at the local level is *part* of the meaning that they carry (Campbell 1998, p 58; 2003, p 3).

Some RTOs adopt a narrow and rule-bound reading of national texts such as Training Packages and the AQTF. This reading takes up a social standpoint of national hegemony within VET, and practitioners working within these approaches describe

experiences of oppression and exclusion. Repeated use of phrases such as 'you've got to', 'you must have', 'you're not allowed to', provide 'traces of oppressive organizational practices' (O'Neill 1998, p 138); yet this kind of ruling is not just imposed by 'powerful others' or through coercion (Ng 1988; Kinsman 1997; Campbell, 2003, p.7). Individual organisations take up and activate ruling concepts in the local activities and procedures that they adopt as they engage with and implement ruling texts (Campbell 2003). In this way, social regulation within VET is actively accomplished by individual RTOs operating across the wide diversity of VET contexts (Kinsman 1997, p.222).

But the narrow and rule-bound reading is not the only way these texts can be activated. Some RTOs appear to achieve a different reading, in which the social relations enacted are aligned less closely to VET hegemony, and more closely to local contexts and issues. That this reading is perceived by practitioners as providing them with a high level of freedom is suggested in the use of phrases such as 'it's enabled us', 'it just leaves it open', and 'it just gives us freedom'.

Organisational culture
What determines the kind of reading that will be achieved in any particular RTO? A number of interviewees suggested that an individual RTO's approach to Training Packages and the AQTF was related to its size and organisational culture.

> But this is the whole thing about the AQTF. That lots of people ... are looking at the AQTF as a purely compliance issue that has been imposed *on* them, rather than looking at it as a *framework* for doing business in this industry. Which some non-RTOs are doing, and some RTOs are doing very well also. Usually the *smaller* ones, because they are seeing it as a competitive advantage in the marketplace (Cheryl).

Several interviewees specifically argued that there are clear differences between AQTF implementation within TAFE colleges as compared to enterprise and private RTOs. Discussing AQTF implementation within TAFE, one interviewee argued:

> ... they suddenly found restrictions placed upon them, and were in panic to get all of that there. And some of the early trial audits and the like found them wanting, so they were petrified that they would lose their status, so they've gone overboard on this conformity. ... And none of them have got that faith in their people. And they have invariably as well placed the need to be compliant in the hands of an internal auditing group which again is stifling initiative (Graham).

This approach to compliance is reflected in comments by VET practitioners who had experience working within the TAFE system.

> ... basically everybody went totally nutty last year trying to prepare for this audit. And they had people, ex-auditors, coming in and doing professional development sessions with us, evaluating our materials, telling us what was what. These auditors were saying things like 'You *must* have everything mapped to every single performance criteria on *all* things you give to the students. ... You're *not allowed* to assess anything apart from either a whole unit of competency or a whole element.' ... There was all these no-no's. ... So we were told by our management 'Do what they say.' We were running around like chooks without heads, changing all our unit outlines and assessment tools (Louise).

To interpret the data as representing a narrow and more bureaucratic approach to Training Package and AQTF implementation within TAFE colleges, as compared to a broader and more flexible approach within private and enterprise RTOs, has a certain intuitive appeal. One possible approach would be to draw on learning network and labour network theory to argue that the restrictive approach to compliance apparently

adopted by some TAFE colleges represents a vertical learning network, characterised by linear planning, pre-structured and pre-designed learning programs, and a highly regulated, centralised organisational structure with the emphasis on rules and regulations (Poell et al 2000, cited in Henry 2001, p.13). Similarly, this approach to Training Package and AQTF implementation would be consistent with a machine bureaucratic labour network, which involves pre-designed and centrally planned work. Placing authority for decisions about AQTF implementation in the hands of a central group of auditors and ex-auditors results in decisions about learning and assessment strategies being made by people with expertise in audit and compliance, rather than being made by learning and assessment professionals on the basis of an understanding of education theory and practice. Learning and assessment strategies in this context may be likely to be developed on the basis of compliance and conformity rather than good educational practice and responsiveness to individual needs.

However, as intuitively appealing as this interpretation may be, the interview data from my study does not necessarily support a clear-cut distinction between AQTF implementation in TAFE colleges and private/enterprise RTOs. To begin with, not all interviewees who had worked in the TAFE system regarded Training Packages and the AQTF as imposing constraints on their professional freedom.

> I'm an apologist for the AQTF in the sense that I first looked at the standards in 2001. I read through the standards and said 'Yeah, our college does all that'. (Mark).

A further issue is that number of interviewees described clear differences in the implementation of Training Packages and the AQTF within the same RTO.

> ... it's quite funny, within the same college, some areas of TAFE say they're hamstrung by the Training Packages, some other departments - and I've got one *wonderful* group - are *so* innovative and *flexible* with the way they've applied the Training Package. They've done things with the Training Package it wasn't even intended to, without compromising *anything.* ... Yet you'll get others that say 'Nope! It's not there, we can't do it. ...' They just get too *literal* around what's there (Barry).

Such internal differences are not limited to TAFE. One practitioner talked about a private RTO that did a proportion of its work under a subcontract arrangement which attracted public funding. He was highly critical of the AQTF compliance requirements applying to the assessment component of this subcontracted work.

> Well here's the instrument that we're gonna base ours on, and it's just got all this information in here … that we *have* to give the candidate regarding the assessment plan, the elements and the method of assessments, the RPL Skills Recognition process, a review and appeals process - all this sort of stuff. ... a 3 page document, straight off the CD-ROM from the Training Package, and then converted to conform to AQTF. It's now 15. ... This is a simple assessment ... and there's 15 pages of information he's not gonna even understand to start with (Colin).

Another interviewee described very different compliance requirements adopted, within a single private RTO, for assessment documentation in industry training as compared to traineeships. In industry training:

> I now develop my own [assessment tools] and the process is I take the Package, I take the performance criteria and adapt the performance criteria to a more active, observational thing where possible. ... So basically everything now is produced in-house, starting *with* the Package (Peter).

But:

> On a government traineeship, we're required to give them a record book. That record book's gotta contain various bits and pieces of information. One of those is the units, and they have to be able to use those to basically RPL. ... I haven't *yet* seen one work (Peter).

Overall the data suggests that the issue may be subtler and more complex than the suggested distinction between approaches to compliance adopted by TAFE colleges as compared to private and enterprise RTOs. While organisational culture may play a part in determining what sort of reading of national texts will be achieved, there is some suggestion that training which attracts public funding is more likely to involve a bureaucratic and restrictive approach to Training Package and AQTF compliance, regardless of the organisational structure and culture of the RTO itself. Roxana Ng (1988) and Gary Kinsman (1997) reported studies that illustrate how conditions associated with the receipt and management of government funds has the effect of coordinating and regulating local activities. In both studies, community-based activist groups were depoliticised and transformed by the regulation accomplished through government funding arrangements, with the result that groups which previously contested government policy on behalf of marginalised and disadvantaged groups began to function instead as part of the government regulatory framework. It may be that government funding within VET is similarly associated with greater conformity with, rather than resistance to, national VET agendas.

But the existence of alternative readings of ruling texts within VET suggests that there remains some scope for resistance. Using institutional ethnography, my PhD research seeks to produce knowledge from the standpoint of VET practitioners rather than the standpoint of government coordination. The outcomes of such research can become a resource for practitioners seeking to resist hegemony and achieve change (Kinsman 1997; O'Neill 1998). With this goal in mind, and considering the impact that the ruling relations of VET have on the positioning of VET practitioners as a profession, I believe that it is important to avoid polarised thinking and the tendency to approach these issues in terms of a dichotomy between TAFE and non-TAFE RTOs.

Conclusions

Using practitioner disquiet about the language of Training Packages as its starting point, this study exposes the impact that the official texts which make up the ruling relations of VET have on the professional freedom of VET practitioners. Ruling texts such as Training Packages and the AQTF are read and enacted differently in different RTOs by individual managers and practitioners. A narrow and rule-bound reading of these texts in everyday situations takes up a particular social standpoint related to the national hegemony, and results in the expertise of VET practitioners being displaced as the authority for decisions about learning and assessment now shifts from those with educational expertise to those with power in audit and compliance. Alternative readings are possible, however, and some RTOs appear to activate these ruling texts in ways aligned less to national hegemony and tend to resist the socially powerful in the everyday, and thereby respond more to local needs. Practitioners in these locations experience this approach as allowing them to exercise their professional judgement in decisions about learning and assessment. While some interviewees suggested that organisational culture played a significant role in determining the approach to compliance adopted by individual RTOs, overall the interview data from this study does not support a simple dichotomy between AQTF and Training Package implementation in TAFE colleges as compared to private and enterprise RTOs. It may be that where learning and assessment receives public funding, regardless of whether the RTO itself is a TAFE college or a private RTO, there is an increased likelihood of Training Packages and the AQTF being implemented in a way which

subordinates and displaces the authority of education professionals at the level of their everyday practice.

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