

ACE working within/outside VET

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Abstract

This paper looks at vocational education and training (VET) policy initiatives currently being circulated within the Victorian adult and community education (ACE) sector. It particularly explores how coordinators working and managing ACE organizations are being encouraged to meet policy requirements that are in some cases at odds with their traditional roles. The paper explores how ACE and VET frontline managers/coordinators are experiencing policy reform differently in some cases and how the central role of identity and identity change in the formation of VET and ACE is being understood from a different philosophical and cultural position.

The reflections and perceptions from seven ACE coordinators, four ACE/RTO managers and fourteen VET frontline managers were examined with the aim of better understanding the working experiences and perceptions of people responsible for delivering and coordinating change within their organizations.

The paper and its conclusions shed light on differences in ACE/VET discursive practices and interpretations of current policy directives and the implications this difference is having on ACE practice and ACE delivery.

Introduction

Over the last ten years, there has been some investigation into the change that has taken place in vocational education and training (VET) and the impact that this change has had on teaching and managerial identity (Chappell & Melville 1995, Hawke 1998, Mulcahy 2004). More recently, VET policy changes are being circulated within the Victorian adult community education (ACE) sector at a frequency not experienced in the past. Requirements for ACE to step inline with VET and deliver skill development programs that produce vocational outcomes are producing tensions in the culture and philosophical approaches of ACE providers. Coordinators working and managing ACE organizations are being encouraged to meet policy requirements that are at odds with their traditional roles (Foley 2005).

Commentators have noted over the past several years that the frontline managers' roles and responsibilities in VET are more diverse (Rice, 2005; Mulcahy 2002; Lumby 1997) and have expanded (Patterson 1999). Often the position now involves a dual role, that of 'the manager' and teacher. This duality in frontline manager roles is described by Mulcahy (2002, p.1) as 'the central node in a nexus between public policy, business strategy and educational practice'. For coordinators in the ACE sector the situation is similar. ACE Coordinators balance current policy priorities designed to meet vocational outcomes with their more traditional role of community development (Clemans, & Macrae 2003). Adult educators have a long history in the development of local communities through their involvement in community life as well as in the delivery of programs designed to enhance individuals' capacity to engage with their local communities, through literacy, numeracy, general education programs and hobby

programs (Summer 2000). As Sanguinetti, Waterhouse and Maunders (2004) would have it, good practice in ACE is about holistic approaches that engage people in a process that fosters overall personal, intellectual and social development. For many managers in ACE the holistic approaches to delivery are being threatened by current policy priorities that have a heavy emphasis on vocational outcomes (Foley 2005).

Research Methodology

The study sought to gain insight into the influences on VET management (coordinator and frontline manager) practices. Essentially, the research can be seen as an investigation of particular discourses, which are culturally, contextually and politically located and involve the concurrent creation of 'sense making' through discursive construction, enabling a new way of seeing the VET frontline management world. This research puts forward alternate viewpoints for social, cultural, philosophical and economic understandings of the change processes that are taking place in and through the working lives of frontline managers, and particularly for this study, the working lives of ACE coordinators.

The paper draws from data that explores how ACE /VET managers/coordinators are experiencing policy reform and how the central role of identity and identity change in the formation of frontline manager¹ in ACE/VET is being understood from a separate philosophical and cultural position. The reflections and perceptions from 24 ACE/VET frontline managers are examined with the aim to better understand the working experiences and perceptions of people responsible for delivering and coordinating change in their management roles.

Eligible participants for the study were broadly defined as those who fitted into the category of front line manager working in the Victorian VET system. This group of people were responsible for a broad range of duties across the sector. Essentially, this group of managers are responsible for the supervision of staff and are typically known, within their organizations, as course coordinators, program managers, frontline managers, program coordinators, special skills teachers, head teachers, managers or departmental managers.

The data is drawn from 24 adult participants, ranging in age from age 35 to 58 years and consisting of a similar ratio of male and female participants. The VET organizations comprised two TAFE institutions, two private registered training organizations (RTO), one group training organization (GTO), two RTOs combined with adult community education organizations (ACE) and two stand alone ACE organizations. The research looked closely at the personal constructions of the participants lived working experiences. The case information was collected over an eighteen-month period using observations and individual interviews containing open ended questions. Participants were visited in their workplaces on between four to eight separate occasions. The focus for these visits was observing participants engaging in their professional working practices.

¹ The use of the dual terms manager/coordinator is to recognise the differences in title of managers across the sector that are responsible for the overall general management and coordination of staff and the day to day running of the areas they are responsible for.

Interview data – summary of the findings

Issues relating to change were common themes occurring in the data for respondents. The changes they spoke of related to the increase in administrative work, the implementation of training packages, and the added stress relating to compliance obligations and funding changes. As with other areas in VET, the responses in the ACE organizations also identified, funding model changes, increases in report writing and compliance related paperwork and a heightening in competitiveness. For example Susie² from an RTO/ACE organization spoke about her experiences of change. For ACE respondents these changes were seen as shifting the emphasis towards VET, which was often resented by ACE participants in the study.

I'm uncomfortable with this place being referred to as VET, that's the biggest change for us, all of a sudden we are being placed in the VET industry...I see us as more than VET. Vocational outcomes have become part of the rhetoric coming from all the government brochures lately and I see us as providing so much more to people. The people that come to us are not just about getting vocational qualifications. For most of them it's about community and coming together in a sort of supportive environment. Some are mothers just getting together and having a laugh; others are disabled and won't ever have the capacity to work. Vocational outcomes are nonsense in many of the cases here.

When asked about roles and responsibilities it was broadly agreed by respondents that the roles and responsibilities of VET frontline managers had changed considerably. Essentially it was understood that these changes were occurring to meet the needs of a sector that was operating in a more competitive and flexible environment. Sam, who works in a GTO in Melbourne, identified his role as complex and multifaceted. He described his working identity as consisting of a multitude of roles that highlighted the complexity.

My working identity is that of teacher, trainer, facilitator, mentor, sales person, lecturer, counselling, sales role, research, marketing, we do all of that all in one, report writer to communicate things to management, statistical analysis – analyse stats and try to make sense of it, quality control person, and systems analyst looking at processors and systems, auditor, OHS coordinator.

When asked about the cultural shift in VET, the responses were divided. Daniel's comments were in line with the majority of TAFE, RTO and Group Training responses that reflected their understandings of the cultural shift in their discursive language of; 'business', 'business like', 'flexibility', 'training' and 'training provision', 'professional', 'profit conscious' and 'competitive'. Daniel suggested that ...

... the culture here is becoming more business like. When I say 'we' I mean TAFE. There is more pressure for the departments here to develop fee for service courses and so on. This pressure is far more obvious than before. I suppose our TAFE corporate image is also getting sharper and the old days of trade school is being replaced by students who are being taught many business, community services, nursing and arts courses, not just the old trade courses. This is making the student mix different and more diverse than ever before.

² All names in the study are pseudonyms to protect participant privacy.

The ACE/RTO respondents were mixed, according to which area within the organization was being commented on. This was clear in the responses from June and reiterated in Dan's comments.

It's very different in our ACE area. We cater for a very different clientele there and the culture is very different. It's hardest for our learning centre teachers to understand corporate stuff and the idea of being competitive. I get most of my resistance from our learning centre people. We [RTO] amalgamated two years with the local learning centre and have been having difficulty ever since finding common ground. (June)

Our culture here is quite different to TAFE or RTO's. We have an ACE cultural philosophy which is to help those on the periphery, the ones that are at risk... those who can't or aren't ready to work. The culture here has a lot of ...I don't know, social justice at its base. This cultural base has an impact on our RTO division because we arrange our programs to bridge...where possible...from ACE say literacy programs to training programs such as retail. It gives our ACE people who are ready a more comfortable pathway to learning opportunities. (Dan)

Ted, an ACE/RTO manager running a large organization in a regional town in Victoria, exemplified the variety and diversity in programs being run through a 'mixed' organization.. It highlights the essence of the dual sector organization and its capacity to flexibly and creatively meet the social, cultural and education and training needs of the community. This manager, like other RTO/ACE managers commented on the creative way he was able to manage his organization to be both compliant and intuitive so that the organization was able to 'hear' the needs of local communities and deliver those needs using creative management practices.

Here we cater for all types, and I really mean *all types*, we get people with business degrees and teachers upgrading their qualifications by obtaining the certificate four in workplace trainer and workplace assessor, we have traineeships and their record keeping requirements delivered through here which keep the traineeship coordinator *well and truly overworked*, and we have VCAL program arrangements with the local secondary school. We also have young mums here doing nutrition programs funded through the local health service and people from all ages groups doing literacy and numeracy programs through our general education certificate, funded through ACFE... We're a vibrant and really busy place with people everywhere most of the time; it's hard for me to concentrate especially when I have to write a tender for more money. I have a philosophy [which is] see if we can help our community and do it as viably as possible. We manage to do that by keeping our records up to date, moving student hours from one course to another so we can service our clients better. And looking for funding from all over the place not just through purchasing student contact hours. I think in this town we are an important institution and we're proud of that. (Ted)

Interview data: ACE

When asked about roles and responsibilities, ACE respondents told a quite different story. ACE respondents were more inclined to focus on discourses around the notion of 'commitment' and 'community'. Mary, for example, saw that her responsibility and role identity was tied up in the philosophies and values of the organization. She

understood these values and philosophies as ‘assisting people’ in need in her ACE community.

We are an adult community educator primarily; we are funded by ACFE and help to assist the best way we can. My role and identity is enmeshed with our philosophies and values. I can’t separate them and I’m sure if you ask our staff here, nor could they separate the two.

In the ACE responses to a question about the cultural shift, the discourses of ‘community’, ‘community participation’ and ‘community contribution’ were at the forefront of the responses. The importance of the learning environments in which ACE delivered its programs was seen as contributing to the culture of ACE generally. For example Janice described the culture as being ‘wrapped up in social contribution and non-institutional learning’.

I see that we provide a service that is more...socially conscious than VET. There is nothing corporate or glamorous about the work I do. It’s hands-on, ‘pull up your sleeves stuff.’ The culture here is giving to the community.... we are seen as the ‘hippy place’. I want to change that image because I think it isolates us from groups of people who need our help. Our culture is wrapped up in social contribution and non-institutionalised learning. We are proud that people want to come here because we are a comfortable place to be for them. If they learn, all well and good, but if they just come, that’s OK too.

Tony understood and described ACE culture as not ‘fitting into VET’. He told the story of the ACE culture being ‘bound around our environment, the houses, that are designed to be welcoming and non institutional’ Importantly Tony also understood the importance of being more profit conscious.

We are, in ACE I mean, torn between giving to society through community education and trying to become more able to make money and develop projects. It’s really difficult because there isn’t enough time or money to do either well. Our culture here and elsewhere in ACE is bound around our environment, the houses, which are designed to be welcoming. That’s why we work so well as VCAL providers. Often ACE houses are the only venues kids who are disengaged from school will come too. We all in ACE see that as a strength and important component to our success. Yet more and more we are being told to run courses that are accredited and work more closely with TAFE. I’m not sure what type of hybrid this is going to create; no doubt whatever we become we will have to be sharper and more flexible with our ideals.

Fiona also recognised the culture of ACE as different to VET in that she described its purpose as a foundation or ‘first step’ for people in their learning. Fiona described ACE as having a ‘culture of caring and community’.

I am an optimist by nature and hope that government will see the value of our independence. We are culturally different to all other VET in that we are the foundation or first step for people who haven’t or don’t have the confidence to take up a course or learn to read, or in some cases learn to socialise away from home. ACE is important to VET, as it is the link for some people to move across to traditional VET. I believe our future will be very different than the past: we will have to ‘tow the VET line’ and develop outcomes for our people. These are supposed to be tangible and link directly to VET or work. Where this puts the other people I have spoken about I don’t know. I hope ACE

remains the one place that has a culture of caring and community and doesn't become too prescriptive and outcomes based...I guess only time will tell. In the meantime we struggle with less money and more and more need for us in this region.

The culture of ACE

The data shows that the VET frontline managers in this study are experiencing changes to their working lives. These changes were identified by respondents who indicated change in their roles through added administrative responsibilities, greater emphasis on strategic management and human resource management practices. The issue of added pressures to meet Australian quality training framework (AQTF) requirements and the need for greater vigilance to meet auditing compliance responsibilities were also common themes in the responses. In most cases across the sector coordinators understood their role as that of a *professional* and also understood the need for a more strategic or business-like approach to their roles.

When asked about a cultural shift in the VET sector, ACE organizations and the ACE division of ACE/RTO organizations told a very different story. Common responses were related to discourses of 'inclusion', 'community contribution', and the culture of 'caring and social justice'. ACE respondents were eager to describe their learning spaces as being 'welcoming and non-institutional' learning environments. This was sharply contrasted with TAFE, RTO and GTO responses that were themed around discourses of 'business management', 'profit consciousness, 'industry requirements' and 'program deliverables'.

ACE within/outside VET

The data confirm that ACE managers acknowledge the need to be more closely linked to VET and understand the value of vocational outcomes and pathways to other VET programs. The data also shows that ACE managers are experiencing policy changes in their working practices in similar ways to other VET frontline managers identified. There are, however, sharp differences in the data related to ACE coordinator understandings of their primary role as providers. This was evident in strong understandings of cultural and philosophical views connected with community contribution.

It could be argued that ACE managers are a model of heterogeneity, that of a multiple member (Star 1991), working within and outside VET. Gleeson and Shain (1999) have identified the conflict between economic pressures and frontline managers' pedagogical values and have described the educational manager in further education in the United Kingdom as being situated in a complex reconstruction of roles as both teacher and manager, brokering between ideological values and economic imperatives. ACE frontline managers in this study are also conflicted in their role as manager, teacher, activist and community worker (Rule 2005). This added cultural and philosophical dimension, constructs ACE organizations as *other* than VET and at the same time situated within VET.

Adult educators have a long history of community participation contribution and community activism (Summer 2000). These philosophies work to promote rich and sustainable communities irrespective of the capacity of participants in the learning environment to meet vocational outcomes (Foley 2005). ACE organizations continue to

play a role both inside VET through their capacity to provide pathways to VET, meet vocational outcomes, deliver programs for local community members and strengthen employment skills. And 'other' from VET as a social and community contributor grounded in community values, that can play a vital role in introducing to ACE learners the opportunity to develop options, make choices, overcome barriers and participate in community life (Volkoff, Golding & Jenkin 1999). Clemans and Macrae (2003, p.33) in their report on ACE outcomes, acknowledge the community development role that ACE play in the community through what they term the 'cement of social capital through society's good will.' These outcomes are developed by connecting people with each other, making contributions through the development of citizenship programs, cultural contributions, the enhancement of community identity and more.

Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to highlight the complex practice of adult community education organizations (Sanguinetti et al, 2004) as they work in what has been described as a multiple membership (1991). That of VET provider and community advocate/contributor drawing repertoires together from mixed worlds. ACE is currently juxtaposed between the metaphors of VET power brokers through policy discourses of employability and outcomes and the repertoires of social inclusion.

The study takes the view that there is strength residing in the ACE/RTO model of VET delivery, where we have identified an acceptance of the cultural and social significance of ACE. Certainly there is more recently a recognition coming from government that aims to integrate social justice and economic objectives through a more holistic approach to the provision of education and training (Kearns, 2006). And, that economic benefit for community is linked to the health and wellbeing of communities generally. Indeed the economic benefits of increased participation in education and training to the economic future of the country is identified through a recent study undertaken in 2005 by Access and Economics for Business Council of Australia and Dusseldorp Skills Forum. Perhaps the link to the successful implementation of both education and training and social justice is through a model that incorporates these values and principles already.

The study clearly identifies that managers acknowledge ACE as an important stepping stone for and to other programs. This *incorporated* VET model that of ACE/RTO shows a successful cross *pollination* of programs which link to community and certificate courses through the *ACE first step* approach. This approach encourages social cohesion and develops connections with other agencies in the community, such as community health to strengthen preparatory program effectiveness, the wellbeing of community members through ACE/VET provision assists to increase participation in education which in turn develops human capital.

Perhaps the current economic agenda is too thin and a model that incorporates community health, adult and community education and registered training as a suite of programs to local communities, is the model worth considering.

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