What's worth knowing in the history of publicly funded vocational education – and why?

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Abstract

The paper examines the possibilities of the history of publicly funded vocational education for informing contemporary Vocational Education and Training (VET) practice. It presents three perspectives that address the 'contexts of policy and practice' as well as the overall conference theme of 'Evolution, revolution or status quo?': first, that vocational education's remembered and 'forgotten' past are able to illustrate the diversity of the sector's achievements over time, and relate examples of past practice for contemporary application; second, that a rigorous study of the past may provide examples of 'alternative futures' in addition to the sense of what is durable and contingent; third, that the tools of the vocational education historian are able to be turned to undermine myths that simplify or distort popular interpretations of the sector's past. The methodologies to generate data from each of these perspectives will be examined in detail, with appropriate examples. Areas for investigation and discussion include the embedding of the traditions of vocational education and their replication in contemporary practice, the sector's 'siloed' past and its cross-sectoral 'opening out', watershed moments (for example the Kangan Report and the Dawkins' revolution), and the changing focus of policy construction, from 'organic' to 'formal' and from local to state to federal. The paper's theoretical arguments will draw from narrative social history theory.

Introduction

To answer historically the question 'Evolution, revolution or status quo?' asked of the AVETRA conference theme 'contexts of policy and practice' is simple: all of the above. Publicly funded vocational education's highly contingent past, localised and generalised across two centuries of Australian practice, has ensured long periods of gradualism, brief and rapid episodes of convulsive revolution, and frustrating times of stultifying inertia. How may these responses be represented in a manner that holds value for the contemporary VET practitioner? While holding true to the historian's mantra that the narration of the sector's stories has value in and of itself, there is within the past ample evidence of its pragmatic appeal to the policy maker, researcher, educator and administrator. One possible lens to view this use-value is through examples of past policy creations and their associated practices. Their revelation and unravelling contain contexts, lessons and warnings, which, while not pretending to replicate contemporary policy and practice, may nevertheless provide cautionary tales or seeds of 'alternative' futures. The work of historian Harold Silver and contemporary policy researchers Sandra Taylor, Fazal Rizvi, Bob Lingard and Miriam Henry provide a valuable introduction to this approach.

In a revealing passage from his *Education, Change and the Policy Process* (1990), Silver writes:

The analysis of policy…is concerned with its origins and intentions – the complexities of competing and conflicting values and goals, the explicit and inexplicit representation of objectives which spring from diverse economic and social realities. It is concerned with the policy choices that are made, the decisions made – by whom, with what timing and with what authority. It is concerned with the guidelines, the rules, the regulations, the machineries of information, the interpretation in practice, the outcomes. At its most theoretical the analysis is concerned with what happens and why; at its most pragmatically historical it asks what, in known instances, seems to have happened (p. 213).

In unpacking Silver's advice to the social historian, and drawing from other sections of his text, the following guidelines may be suggested. First, policy construction is a form of human practice grounded in a specific and heavily contextualised time and place, and therefore amenable to the historian's investigative armoury. Second, history is a study of choices that seeks and is able to offer an understanding of human volition and agency, either collectively or individually. Third, history has the capacity to analyse connections between policy intentions and policy outcomes, both contemporally and across time. And finally, historical research has the capacity to debunk contemporary readings of the past and discover and re-discover traditions and alternative pasts, and from them perhaps extrapolate alternative futures (Silver, 1990: 1-30).

What, then, comprises policy and its practice, and their analysis? Within the context of Australian educational policy research, Taylor *et al* (1997) remind readers that 'policy' may be defined simply as 'whatever governments choose to do, or not to do (Dye, in Taylor *et al*, p. 35).' From this, 'policy analysis' may be considered as 'the study of what governments do, why and with what effects (p. 35)?' They suggest, though, that in practice, policy construction and its analysis is both broad in scope and highly complex. First, they claim, *policy is more than the text*. The nuances and subtleties of the context in which text is written must be considered when interpreting textual meaning. Text represents 'political compromises between conflicting images of how educational change should proceed (p. 15).' Second, *policy is multi-dimensional*. Contributors to the policy construction bring particular and contestable, and differentially privileged world views. Third, *policy is value-laden*. Policy construction is permeated by a range of stakeholder values. Fourth, *policies exist in context*. Policies do not exist in a vacuum. 'There is always a prior history of significant events, a particular ideological and political climate, social and economic context – and often, particular individuals as well which together influence the shape and timing of policies as well as their evolution and their outcomes (p. 16).' Fifth, *policy making is a state activity*. The state must be regarded as a complex and non-unitary entity of competing parts, each of which has the potential to influence policy construction as progenitor, contributor, or critic. Sixth, *education policies interact with policies in other fields*. Though not always self-evident, education policies often have linkages with other departments and their policies. Seventh, *policy implementation is never straightforward*. Implementation occurs in a social context that mediates policy through site-specific personnel and institutions; what may be intended is not always what is enacted. Eighth, and consequently, *policies result in unintended as well and intended consequences*. 'Policy making is a precarious business, the consequences of which are unpredictable given the complex interrelationship of contextual factors, different and sometimes opposing interests,

linguistic ambiguities and the variety of key players involved in the policy processes (p. 17).'

Taylor *et al* suggest a powerful link between the machinations of policy creation and their multiple representations in social contexts, an environment appealing to the research instincts of the social historian who is bound less by matters related the sociology of knowledge than depicting through narrative analysis a policy's generative complexities and their relation to a contingent 'time, place and people' (Clark, 1975: 443). Working with Silver's possibilities for historical policy research and Taylor, *et al's* understandings of the contemporary policy analysis task, the paper first outlines key theoretical and methodological assumptions and practices underpinning the collection, collation and analysis of its representative historical data. This is followed by 'vignettes of possibility' of past policy practices and contexts with contemporary implications, their prospects as 'alternative futures', and their capacity for VET myth busting. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of historical research for contemporary policy making and the place of reflective research in advancing practical VET knowledge-making.

Some considerations about theory: the place of critical realism

Social historians have been rarely predisposed to theoretical musings, not from incapacity but rather from an awareness borne of the experience of sacrificing 'the intricacies of history before the god of tidy theory' (Selleck, 1994: 171). Perhaps it was with this in mind that Hancock exclaimed: 'Let historians leave to others the pursuit of abstraction' (Hancock, 1954: 208). However, as Roberts remarks, 'The fact that historians prefer to practise their metaphysics than talk about them does not mean they cannot and should not be discussed and defended' (Roberts, 1996: 225). While heeding warnings of Teflon solutions for cast-iron challenges, ideas drawn from theories associated with critical realism may go some way towards offering one such approach to interpreting and explaining the historian's working environment.

Critical realism seeks clarity and simplicity within an assumed but critically known singular reality. More correctly based on the idea of 'transcendental realism' critical realism assumes that reality simply 'is'. Willie Thompson candidly remarks in this vein that 'reality is what can kill you if you disregard its attributes (and of course may do so in any case)' (Thompson, 2000: 97). Its transcendental nature can only be grasped transitively through fallible and limited human capacities such as cultural location, belief, perception, knowledge and theory. As these phenomena are concept dependent they require explanation and interpretation through the researcher's subjective lenses (though they still exist independently of such positioning). This approach, including the search for meaning within particular situations, offers a softer, yet more 'real' view of research that celebrates rigour in method while recognising the tentativeness of its outcomes. In this way critical realism eschews the neatness of logical positivism or crude empiricism, forged as they are on assumptions of *actualism* or the contrivance of research situations that seek invariance and predictability. Seen in this way critical realism reframes the scientific 'laws' of positivist science as 'tendencies' or explanations of causal mechanisms rather than universal proclamations (Lopez and Potter, 2001: 3-5; Sayer, 1992: 5-6; Maxwell, 2004: 8). At the other extreme, a critical realist positioning avoids also

postmodernism's hyper-relative indeterminacy and nihilism (Popkewitz, Franklin, and Pereyra, 2001).

Once a non-discursive reality is acknowledged independently of the knowing researcher and that rigorous research methods are able to be devised capable of producing tentative but verifiable outcomes, then a defensible positioning is possible for the social historian. Under this schema, the historical practitioner is able to interrogate the past for meanings contingent on the 'real' times that produced them and represent those meanings through robust and defensible narratives. This is critical realism's promise (Rushbrook and Pickersgill, 2004).

Some considerations about method: re-inventing Rankean historicism

In less disciplinary complex times, classical history was re-engineered into the modern era by nineteenth-century German Romantic Leopold von Ranke. Ranke's principles of historical research underpin, though not uncritically, much that passes today as narrative history best-practice. In establishing history as a university-based discipline Ranke's first principle was '*Wie es eigentlitch gewesen*, or finding out and narrating history 'how essentially it was' (Evans, 2000: 17; Thompson, 2000: 4). Often disparagingly referred to as 'historicism', the approach rests on three principles (Tosh, 2002: 9-12): first, that there is a gulf separating the present from the past – it is indeed a 'foreign country'; the historian's difficult task is to understand and represent the 'mentalities' or 'Otherness' of the past while taking into account his or her 'presentist' assumptions (Thompson, 2000: 174). Second, to better capture these resonances, the historian pays particular attention to *context*, or placing the object of investigation within the age or ages that gave it shape. The third principle of historicism is the recognition of historical *process* or the interconnectivity of events over time. This awareness contributes to the 'much bigger question of how we got from "then" to "now"' (Tosh, 2000: 11).

Ranke's rendition of historicism was underwritten by his introduction to modern history of a rigorous process of inquiry to interrogate the written records of the past, or 'primary sources'. Drawn from Philology and its brief to authenticate a text's veracity with regard to authorship, the methodology forms the bedrock of the narrative historian's craft. Documents are tested for their authenticity, consistency of relationship with similar documents, internal meaning and capacity to provide insights into the thinking of the age.

Once verified, the documentary or archival record (and in contemporary settings the oral testimony of the living) is used to reconstruct and represent, however imperfectly, the period and events under investigation (Evans, 2000: 18). The narrative employed, according to Roberts (1996), is constructed as a 'reason-giving account of why past actors did what they did' (p. 222) and is the *product* of the *process* of historical inquiry. Further, Roberts continues, 'Narrative historians tell stories about the past because human beings are narrative creatures and action is narrative in character' (Roberts, 1996: 223; Roberts, 2001). 'Gaps' in the evidence informing the narrative may be interpreted through employing historian R. G. Collingwood's 'historical imagination', an *a priori* 'web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by statements of [the historian's] authorities (Collingwood, 1989:242). Overall, the Rankean method is considered 'scientific' in a modernist

sense as the investigative process, regardless of initial hypothesis, problem-posing or theoretical positioning must be prepared to be challenged by the historical investigator's dialogue with the sources: 'The first pre-requisite of the serious historical researcher must be the ability to jettison dearly-held interpretations in the face of the recalcitrance of the evidence' (Evans, 2000: 120).

Using this brief, the social historian, as suggested above, is able to illustrate the diversity of human achievement, or not, over time. This is accounting for the past as a worthwhile project in itself, without reference to utility. In doing so, however, it *may* provide utility through historical examples of possibilities for 'alternative futures' (Silver, 1990:. 1-30) and a sense of 'what is durable and contingent in our present condition' (Tosh, 1991: 19). The tools of the historian may also be turned to undermine, 'myths which simplify or distort popular interpretations of the past' (Tosh, 1991: 21; Connell, 1970).

Over several millennia history has served humankind well. The Rankean method, an upgrade on classical or antiquarian history, has critically absorbed many of the assumptions of the Enlightenment project, in particular the belief that language is able to represent accurately past realities, that 'the truth is out there', and that the social historian enjoys a privileged authority and relationship with his or her sources (Rushbrook and Pickersgill, 2004; Burns, 1997: 387-396).

What's worth knowing: vignettes of possibility?

To use a metaphor, the history of Australian publicly funded vocational education might be thought of as occupying different registers in time and space, each determined by the length of time its constituent features or events unfold, persist or fade. To borrow from the French *Annales* school, to grasp this metaphor requires the historical observer to suspend the idea of conventional linear time and replace it, perhaps making use of her or his historical imagination, with the idea of seeing the world unfold as a 'plurality of social time' (Tosh, 1991: 125). Famous in the *Annales* literature, and in particular through the work of Fernand Braudel, is the division of historical registers into *la longue duree* (the long term) or the enduring environmental conditions and 'mentalities' underpinning material life, the medium term of contingent and changing forms of social organisation, and the short term or agential time of individuals (Tosh, 1991: 125; Evans, 2000: 154-155; Thompson, 2000: 30). Though the metaphor of co-existing time registers met with little success in *Annales* work it has served many historians well as a heuristic device of some power in separating temporal levels of historical causality. Within vocational education a truncated *la longue duree* might be thought of as those persisting historical features underlying and defining its evolution as a recognisable educational sector. During times of organisational atrophy long term influences might also shape the maintenance of the status quo. Medium term and short term registers might be thought of as those more volatile influences shaping sectoral revolution, particularly in the shape of shifting political allegiances and personalities. So, to cut short a metaphor, it may be useful to think of the conference theme 'Evolution, revolution, status quo?' as a series of co-existing temporal planes each in their own way shaping together the past, present and future of Australian vocational education. Some vignettes suggesting some of the temporal registers outlined are considered below: the concept of 'tradition' and 'organic policy making' are considered as forces of organisational

evolution; globalisation, the economy, politics and the power of biography as forces of revolution; and apprenticeship and operative training as harbingers of the status quo.

Evolution
A useful way of framing publicly funded vocational education's history is to adopt the time-honoured organising principle of continuity and change, but mediated through a critical understanding of the notion of 'tradition'. 'Tradition' is a framing concept to ground an understanding of these apparent contradictions, particularly when applied to explanations of institutional creation, maintenance and survival. Though uncritically applied in most educational literature as a force of institutional conservatism, a closer reading of tradition reveals its possibilities as an evolutionary change agent. Central to this turn is the consideration of tradition-making, tradition-maintenance and tradition transformation as living practice; that is, traditions exist only through everyday legitimation, either consciously or unconsciously (Shils, 1981; Williams, 1985, pp. 115-117; Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994; Rushbrook, 2004). And, while institutional traditions weigh heavily toward the preservation of the status quo, they must include also imperatives for adaption and change. For only in this way can institutions transform themselves while preserving all that constitutes them. Thus, tradition is understood here not only as representing those coveted, carefully maintained and constantly reinvented hegemonic discourses, norms, practices and artefacts defining, maintaining and defending a collective institutional ethos, but also as those patterns of 'structured silences' not necessarily overtly valued or articulated but exercising equal and often greater influence. In a crude typology, traditions may be cast either *traditions of continuity* or *traditions of change*. In various open and hidden ways, both contain possibilities for reading alternative pasts and imputing alternative futures.

Using this typology, earlier work on TAFE tradition-as-continuity by Murray-Smith (1966) and Batrouney (1985) provide a useful introduction. Two central traditions of continuity may be summarised as traditions associated with the *purposes* of vocational education (for example, the amelioration of social and economic advantage, and facilitating an eclectic range of utilitarian or work-based formal and informal education programs), and traditions associated with vocational education *organisation and administration*, including meeting local needs through decentralisation and community-based management (for example, mechanics institutes, technical colleges and adult education providers). To Batrouney's and Murray-Smith's traditions of continuity may be added two counterbalancing traditions of change: 'sectoral identity' and 'private sector legitimacy' (Rushbrook, 1995; Rushbrook, 1997a; Rushbrook, 1997b). *Sectoral identity* is a tradition suggested by the definitional and funding struggle of public vocational education providers and their associated interest groups for recognition within state, and later national, educational bureaucracies. The ability to adapt to circumstances which permit a distinct and separate identity from that encompassed by, initially, the larger primary and secondary sectors, and later from the university and private provider sectors characterises this tradition. This malleability to adjust to prevailing contingencies yet retain sectoral core values has been labelled by Murray-Smith (1965) as the sector's possession of a 'mutation gene'. *Private sector legitimacy* is a tradition shaped in part by the maintenance of sectoral identity. Public vocational education provider's quest for private sector blessing of credentialled vocational education programs is seen as

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an act of sectoral legitimation. Its self-claimed 'special relationship with industry' is often held up as a trump-card of sectoral distinctiveness (Rushbrook, 1995: 217; Rushbrook, 2004). Together, both forces of continuity and change have exerted a profound influence on the history of public vocational education, whether technical education, Technical and Further Education (TAFE), adult and community education, or VET (Rushbrook, 1997b; Goozee, 1993). As a historical 'lesson' they should be kept in mind when assessing the risk and rewards, including system agency and resistance, of contemporary policy and practice innovation.

It is perhaps difficult to comprehend for the New Millennium observer that prior to the 1980s, with some exceptions, public vocational education policy was constructed 'organically'. This form of evolutionary endogamous policy making involved industry practitioners, professional association and organised labour representatives, and experienced vocational educators. It is only in the era of economic rationalism and its associated managerialism that vocational education has been subjected to relentless 'ministerialisation' or firm 'top-down' and policitised control (Spaull and Hince, 1986: 99-100; Rushbrook, 1995: 287-290). An excellent example of organic or endogamous policy making over more than a half century from the mid-1920s until the early 1980s is the creation of middle-level or paraprofessional 'technician' courses. It may be claimed with some certainty that without the myriad courses developed to provide 'value-added' trades support for professions such as engineering architecture and accountancy there would not have been created the TAFE system we know today, for it was the curriculum work of middle-level stakeholders, together with existing apprenticeship and adult education programs, that carved out technical colleges as distinctively recognisable institutions separate from secondary schools and higher education (Rushbrook, 2005). During the late 1960s through the mid-1980s this evolutionary work highlighted the sector's 'Cinderella' status and led to belated federal funding (Rushbrook, 1997b; Rushbrook, 2003; Rushbrook, 2005a). Within this process system bred adult and vocational educators, including Victoria's Director of Technical Education Jack Kepert (Spaull and Rushbrook, 2001) and Council of Adult Education founder Colin Badger (Rushbrook, 2001a) played key roles, emphasising to the historical researcher the importance of biographical scholarship in understanding the sector's evolution. With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps as an 'alternative future' a return to 'organic' tripartite policy and curriculum practice may lend 'authenticity' to current Training Package construction processes?

Revolution
While the work of defining, establishing and consolidating public vocational education's identity remains firmly with its practitioners and stakeholders, its revolutionary change agents are generally equally and firmly found outside the sector. Throughout public vocational education's history Headley Beare's 1986 proclamation that 'The future of education is not going to be left to educators' (Beare, 1986) has held true. Sharply punctuated between long periods of evolution and stasis revolutionary change has been dictated by the forces of globalisation and its national political agents. Early and mid-twentieth century change was ushered in by the exigencies of war. In both WWI and WWII a range of revolutionary vocational education programs reshaped a moribund sector with state and federal funding and a plethora of programs and students' for example at its height from 1944 until its decline from the early 1950s following the Korean War, the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme reshaped the lives of tens of thousands of returned

servicepeople (Rushbrook, 1995: 30-36). The favouring of scientific management or Taylorism as an industrial production methodology during the same period shaped the workplace discourses of these willing students, the effects of which remain today in industrial production systems such as Total Quality Management and curriculum technologies such as Competency Based Training (Rushbrook and Brown, 2001).

Arguably the most spectacularly driven external change was the early 1970s appointment of Department of Labour and National Service First Assistant Secretary Myer Kangan to head an inquiry into the status of Australian vocational education. With the sheer force of his personality and commitment to lifelong learning through formal vocational education programs he gave the Cinderella sector a distinct name and identity, a philosophy and much needed funding (Rushbrook and Mackinnon, 1998). Later evisceration of the sector by the 'Dawkins revolution' that separated out personal development from the instrumental needs of the workplace further modified the sector to enhance a skills deprived Australian economy from the forces of the *laissez-faire* global marketplace (Rushbrook, 1995: 308-319). Fine tuning of the 'new' VET sector from the mid-1990s sought to bring together former sectoral apartheids and welcome partnerships were forged between TAFE colleges, secondary schools, higher education and emerging privately backed and publicly funded Registered Training Organisations (Rushbrook, 1997). The post-WWII years represented a steady shift of power from the local to the state and from the state to the federal, a shift not always welcomed by those 'on the ground'.

The forces of revolutionary change outside the VET sector remain a salutary warning that vocational education remains at the whim of forces beyond its control. During times of economic plenty it tends to suffer from benign neglect, only to be resuscitated only during times of globally driven economic crisis. That such a crisis has existed in some form or another since the early 1970s, and thus for more than a generation of VET research and practice, should be no guarantee of such privileging in future times of economic stability, should they ever occur again. The astute VET researcher and practitioner should heed the warning of the place of vocational education within the economic pendulum.

Status quo
The forces of stasis within vocational education differ from the forces of evolution through their capacity to frustrate socially and economically appropriate reform. Perhaps the most persistent representatives of *status quo* maintenance until the dawn of the New Millennium were apprenticeship and operative training. As a form of vocational education that was effectively controlled both legislatively and industrially from outside the sector, educators and bureaucrats endured decades of frustration to modernise its practices. However, the patriarchal nature of the blue collar 'aristocracy of labour' and its hold over apprenticeship regulatory systems decreed by wages boards and industrial tribunals meant decades of maintenance as a force of educational reaction. Early attempts to reform apprenticeship training through introducing adult female candidates, reducing years of indenture and altering the work-education balance met with fierce resistance until the late 1990s (Rushbrook, 2001). Similarly, the training of operatives as the 'lowest' rung in the Taylorist production system met with employer and organised labour resistance because of increased wage implications or the usurpation of higher skill levels. Always a large potential market for public vocational education, the piecemeal training of operatives

remained for decades the province of in-house training, often through the process of 'sitting next to Nellie.' It was not until the advent of late-1990s Training Packages that this 'forgotten' level of workers was able to take advantage of career pathway training. It also added qualifications to workers previously denied access to training; for example, many areas classified as 'women's work': retail, hospitality, clerical, textiles, to name a few (Brown and Rushbrook, 1995).

Study of the forces of vocational education inertia may provide useful insights to the policy maker and researcher into the mechanisms that block reform. Consequently further study of twentieth century apprenticeship and operative training and their construction within state and national vocational education systems would be a useful undertaking as a form of utilitarian or pragmatic historical research.

Conclusion

From these vignettes, some interesting observations may be made about policy and practice and their contexts, policy analysis, and the role of the historian in their unravelling. First, the origins of policy may need to pushed back further than Taylor et al's assumption of policy as 'what governments do, or do not do'. Even though they posit the 'state' as somewhat complex, the origins of policy may pre-date the state and policy-as-text, however defined. Policy origins then, though always in some form political, may be found outside the machinations of the party-based state, for example through organic or system based endogamous processes. Second, for the historian, the stories of vocational education's pasts are a reminder that many policy outcomes are idiosyncratic and contingent and not always amenable to 'neat' theoretical explanation. The penchant of the historian for the ideographic rather than the nomothetic, then, privileges historical methodologies in unravelling complex policy stories, particularly when involving a particular people, a particular time and a particular place (Clark, 1975). Third, and finally, Silver's and Taylor et al's emphasis on contextual issues related to the breadth of policy interaction beyond the education sphere is essential advice for informed policy analysis. Unravelling these stories is a journey well worth taking.

Finally, the paper, one hopes, demonstrates the place of 'second degree of separation' or reflective research within AVETRA's agenda. The post-Kangan iteration of vocational education is now mature and has its own much neglected history. It may now be time to reflect on that history and mine its possibilities for improved future VET practice and knowledge-making.

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