

'The elephant in the room': Audit culture and TAFE teachers

*Stephen Black & Ann Reich
University of Technology, Sydney*

AVETRA 13th Annual Conference, Holiday
Inn, Surfers Paradise, 8-9th April 2010

'The elephant in the room'

(Idiomatic expression that applies to an obvious problem no one wants to discuss)

- There is little indication in the Australian VET research literature that audit compliance is a significant issue or problem for VET practitioners
 - Yet, recent research (Black 2009, Rice 2005) demonstrates the significant administrative burden of audit compliance experienced by Head Teachers in TAFE NSW
 - Have audits transformed the work of VET practitioners?
-

Research Method

- Survey questionnaire emailed to Head Teachers in TAFE NSW. Open-ended responses to audits.
 - Semi-structured interviews with 12 Head Teachers in two Institutes
 - Three focus groups conducted with groups of teachers (8-12 in each group) from TAFE Access sections
-

Audit society and audit cultures

- Audit explosion in late 80s and early 90s in UK (Power 1997)
 - Now common world-wide with 'new public management' (NPM) for assuring quality in public sector organisations using business derived concepts (Apple 2007; Rose 1999)
 - In NPM, audit is a key technique for limiting risk and assuring trust in public service systems - audit culture (Strathern 2000; Apple 2007)
 - Audit - "control of control" (Power 1997) that is acting on control systems from a distance rather than earlier supervisory inspections
-

Audit society and audit cultures

- Shapes the 'governed' (teachers, head teachers, managers) by prescribing processes to be audited setting outcomes/ record-setting systems and effects on identities
 - Emphasis on "paper trail" rather than professional expertise - 'the logics and technical requirements of audit displace the internal logics of expertise' (Rose 1999:154)
 - Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) "mind the gap" between professional judgement and measures of audit processes
-

Audits and VET

- UK - audit culture and the rise of evidence-based practices. FE College 'inspections' (Ofsted)
 - But there remains a 'space for struggle as well as outcomes that are contrary to those of policy makers and curriculum designers' (Avis 2007:125-6)
 - Australian VET - an audit culture focused exclusively on government and industry agendas. 'There is compliance but not commitment' (Seddon 2009:69)
-

Facing up to an audit culture

- What is a formal audit?
 - 'Financial management, RPL targets, ASH targets, AQTF audits, ITSE audits, ISO audits, internal audits, ICChecklists' (Black 2009:5)
 - A 'huge increase in the volume of work around audit requirements'
 - 'We're now always being audited ... sometimes you feel they are ready to pounce ...'
-

'More and more we operate for auditors, not students'

- Reporting requirements that are 'absolutely absurd ... you just can't see the educational value'
 - 'it will frighten the students away'
 - Assessment validation - (the assessment tasks) 'just sit in a drawer, just in case, in case an auditor comes along ...'
-

Tensions between audit requirements and professional expertise

- 'My teachers prepare all my notes for me and tell me what I'm doing each week ... I don't do the sort of lesson preparation I used to do as a teacher. I just don't get time' (Head Teacher)
 - All I'm doing is reacting to everything that comes across my desk ... I'm flat out trying to keep up with the correct assessment, so, that's what the auditors want to see when they come in' (Head Teacher)
-

Responding to audits

- *Deniers*: 'I just tick everything ... Give me a box, I'll tick it'
 - *Pragmatists*: 'I'll do it in one session, tick the boxes. But the rest of the time I'll do what's needed'
 - *Compliers*: '...you feel like, you know, you'll get into trouble'
-

References

- Apple, M. (2007). Education, markets, and an audit culture. *International Journal of Educational Policies*, 1:1, 4-19.
- Avis, J. (2007). *Education, policy and social justice: Learning and skills*. Continuum, London
- Black, S. (2009). *Head teacher voices: Insights into the changing role of head teachers in TAFE NSW*. TAFE Teachers Association, Sydney
- Groundwater-Smith, S & Mockler, N. (2009). *Teacher professional learning in an age of compliance: Mind the gap*. Springer, Amsterdam
- Power, M. (1997). *The audit society: Rituals of verification*. Oxford University Press, Oxford
- Rice, A. (2005). Technical and further education (TAFE) head teachers: Their changing role. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 10:1, 39-56.
- Rose, N. (1999). *Powers of freedom: Reframing political thought*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge
- Seddon, T. (2009). Contestability, information asymmetry and quality signals in a competitive training market, in Karmel, T, Beddie, F and Dawe, S (eds) *Competition in the training market*. National Centre for Vocational Education and Research, Adelaide, pp 65-78
- Strathern, M. (ed). (2000). *Audit Cultures: Anthropological studies in accountability, ethics and the academy*. Routledge, London
-