

Identity on the edge: The impact of risk, compliance and performativity on VET practitioner identity.

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Abstract

German Sociologist, Ulrich Beck's seminal political analysis of risk, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, in 1992 posited the concept of 'risk' that has become privatised, objectified and a matter for individual concern. This study examines how the management of 'risk' is achieved through individual scrutiny, audit and review and the impact these practices have on changing VET practitioner identity. Preliminary PhD interviews with VET practitioners, using grounded theory methodology, identified the symbiotic nature of risk management and generation within the current diverse and challenging VET environment. Resistance or acquiescence to compliance practices and the performative VET environment have significant implications for VET practitioners' identity construction.

Introduction

The theme of the 2013 AVETRA conference is '*VET Research at the Edge: Training for diversity and change*'. This paper positions the Vocational Education and Training (VET) Practitioner's identity within a changing globalised environment, where diversity and change are informing the future direction of VET. The research reported here is based on preliminary PhD study data collected through initial interviews that investigate the impact of risk, compliance and performativity on VET practitioner identity.

Conducted within Eastern University's¹ Technical and Further Education (TAFE) division, the research posed semi-structured questions to a range of VET practitioners about the compliance system, workplace environment and their professional identity. Data was and continues to be analysed, including literature relevant to the research theme. Preliminary findings indicate that compliance systems are integral to the challenges of change and diversity within the VET environment in Australia. As a consequence they are of significance for research within the area of VET practitioner identity and the theme of the 2013 AVETRA conference.

Literature review

Contemporary dictionary definitions of risk are 'a chance of disaster or loss', or to 'put in jeopardy', and, a person or thing causing a risk' Collins (2006). Risk discourses have become a defining feature of the late twentieth century and owe much of their initial impact to the work of German Sociologist, Ulrich Beck. Beck's (1992) seminal political analysis of risk in his work *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity* posits the concept of a 'risk society' in which risk has become privatised, objectified and is a matter for individual concern.

Independently, though concurrently with Beck, Giddens (1990; 1991) examined risk and developed concepts of trust and identity through the lens of reflexive modernisation (Breakwell, 2007). Beck, however, claims that we are living in a significant period of change in which a process of reflexive modernisation is taking place, dissolving traditional industrial society and changing the nature of work, including the VET environment (Beck, 1992; Hope,

¹ Eastern University is a pseudonym used to maintain the anonymity of research participants.

2005). A perusal of the literature indicates that there has been scant discussion of the nature of this risk regime in the VET sector (Black & Reich, 2010, p. 1). The literature overwhelmingly reflects *a locus* of interest in the techniques of educator practice, frequently limited to the investigation of educators' skill and knowledge base (Hope, 2005; Mitchell & Ward, 2010, p. 92). Critiques may, therefore, be partial; primarily locating any perceived inadequacies at the level of individual practice.

Integral for understanding the significance of risk in a diverse and changing VET context is a cognisance that risk is generated within a values framework that assigns worth; therefore, the ways in which a society defines risk and orients itself to ameliorate that risk exposes its social, community, material and philosophical values. Risk, therefore, has a socio-cultural epistemology (Lupton, 1999; Douglas, 1985; Beck, 2006).

A complex nexus exists between the sociological analysis of Beck's (1992) 'risk society' and the way it is reflected through 'compliance systems'. Risk at a global level cascades into institutional and organisational levels and ultimately impacts the individual through escalating governance and administrative tasks. At each stage feedback loops operate to refine and develop new areas of risk, risk management strategies and compliance systems, perpetuating a cycle of burgeoning risk and compliance that must be addressed within VET environments (Beck, 2002, 2009; Starr, 2012). 'There is a presumption that having a paper trail reduces risk, ensures efficiency and improves quality management' (Starr, 2012, p 103).

This helps to explain the exponential growth in the 'quality industry' since the 1980s as an approach to monitoring performance and managing risk through increasingly pervasive compliance systems (Neave, 1988; Power, 1997; Bernhard, 2011). Efficiency, cost effectiveness, compliance and quality assurance have become hallmarks of the response to 'risk society's' globalised and competitive educational environment over recent decades (Marginson 1997, Brown, 2011).

The VET practitioner has, and continues, to undergo radical reconstruction in terms of identity, performance expectations and the diversification of roles at the edge of this changing and challenging work environment. VET practice has become a 'risky business', perpetuating a cycle of escalating risk and uncertain identity. A significant ramification of these changes is a reduced capacity for VET practitioners, along with other educators, to protect themselves from risk academically, administratively and physically (Blackmore & Sachs, 2007; White, 2010; Hope, 2005). Traditionally VET practitioners' voices are poorly represented in compliance systems and on governance bodies. Grace's (2005) research examined the impact of 'compliance' as it is used as an instrument of accountability through the influence of skills councils.

Quite how a system as diverse and complex as VET can provide opportunities for genuine input from practitioners and others at the front line is unclear. That it claims to do so but often fails is reflected in a level of cynicism, which I observe at practitioner level within VET. I believe there is a need for further research into the efficacy of the consultation arrangements used in VET and the impact that VET practitioner input to consultations has on VET policy and practice (p. 7).

Overzealous compliance systems risk creating a performative environment where repeated performances of compliance processes begin to render normative what commenced as a construct (Butler, 1999; Blackmore & Sachs, 2007). Beck's individualisation of risk responsibility ripples through Eastern University's compliance systems, filtering down in

support of a performative environment focused on staff performance measurements and outcomes (Deem, 1998; Ball, 2003).

This research links compliance systems and VET practitioner identity with the ways in which these systems operate to ameliorate risk. Beck's risk theory provides a conceptual framework in which to confront these processes. Notwithstanding the normative processes that occur within performative environments, VET practitioners demonstrate the capacity in many instances to use compliance systems as positive frameworks through learning content and assessment debate, professional development and quality improvements, where professional experience and identity may be valued.

Questions relating to theories of identity will be more fully examined in the final PhD research thesis; nonetheless, it is clear given the profusion of approaches to conceptualising identity that a congruent theoretical viewpoint of identity needed to be taken in this research. Accordingly, the notion of identity as a 'performance' found within symbolic interactionism has investigative resonance with Beck's (1992, 2009) 'risk theory' and its outworking in compliance systems and performative norms. Pineau (2005) identifies a growing interest in performance metaphors, 'teaching as a performance is less an observation about instructional style than it is a generative metaphor for educational research' (p. 37).

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical metaphor of performance has further explanatory application, therefore, within VET practitioner identity. On the one hand, compliance systems can promote a performative environment where the possibilities of making autonomous determinations about how to perform is diminished, and failing to conform to the 'performative texts' meets with disapproval (Ball, 2003, p. 11). In contrast, compliance systems can simultaneously be instruments of positive change and diversity where VET practitioners engage in intentionally alternative performances negotiated within their values framework and sense of professional identity.

Extrapolating further from the theoretical lens of risk theory also raises the merit of engaging with practices of reflexivity (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Elliott, 2012). Reflexive modernisation with its process of risk confrontation and reflection may open up the potential to disrupt normalised and normalising compliance systems, thereby creating a space for positive individual and institutional change. 'Incongruity drives change' asserts Lumby (2009, p. 6). Such incongruity is significant for researchers when connected to reflexive practice as a strategy to understand and interrogate VET practitioners' behaviours.

Clearly, risk, compliance and performativity are reflected in complex compliance systems in VET that can concurrently be sites of challenge and catalysts for innovation and improvement or sites of constraint and control. Unfortunately, at present some compliance systems appear to be substantially the *response* to risk rather than the *catalyst* for reflexive responses in VET, at a time of rapid change and considerable global impact.

Methodology

Rather than develop yet another imposed theoretical view a methodology was required that, as far as possible, was consistent with the research aim of understanding the experiences of VET practitioners' and hearing their voices. The grounded theory tradition has thus informed the methodological approach taken to data collection in this research. It is primarily an inductive methodology that features simultaneous collection of data and analysis, theoretical sampling and theory development (Birks & Mills, 2011). The research design includes a

range of gender and ages of VET practitioners at Eastern University. As well as a variety of discipline areas and sessional, fixed term and on going employment contracts, to obtain a broad sample of experiences with the compliance systems. Semi-structured interviews with 12 participants were chosen as the primary method of data collection in this study's design. Although clearly a qualitative method, it endeavours to integrate the strengths inherent in quantitative methods with qualitative approaches (Walker & Myrnick, 2006). This occurs through the method of 'constant comparison' (Babbie, 2011).

To ensure that the process of this PhD research is robust, Guba and Lincoln's philosophy of trustworthiness underpins the data processes (Guba, 1987; Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Congruence will be demonstrated in the final research thesis through an acquittal to Charmaz's (2006) quality criteria using the 12 strategies outlined by Johnson (1997).

Findings

The preliminary results and analysis provided in these pages are based on common categories emerging from the semi-structured interviews conducted for this research. They are organised into a series of thematic headings to allow significant trends to be presented and discussed. Data used to present these findings is preliminary and provisional and is, therefore, in the early stages of categorisation and analytical development. Nonetheless, some preliminary findings that follow are worthy of consideration at this juncture of the research.

Changes in student/practitioner relationships

Data from interviews relating to questions about change indicated that VET practitioners' experience student behaviour as changing considerably over the last decade at Eastern University. An increasingly consumerist approach is taken by some students and one VET practitioner described student approaches to learning like 'buying lollies in a lolly shop' or 'buying a new DVD'. There was considerable frankness from participants about the ways in which VET practitioners behaviour was influenced by the pressure experienced from some students to get what they were 'buying' – a qualification. A withdrawal from the educational relationship and increased stress and anxiety for the VET practitioner were evidenced in participant responses and behaviours.

One consequence of the changing relationship between students and VET practitioners is expressed in relation to Vet practitioner access. Participants revealed that contact details and availability are more carefully maintained and restricted than in the past in an attempt to manage the demands of some students. More formal management of students within the compliance structures appeared to be another way participants protected themselves from risk. One VET practitioner labeled the practices of some students as 'bullying'.

Administration, compliance and student need

Interview questions relating to administration and compliance systems evoked responses that demonstrated the difficulties VET practitioners experienced at Eastern University, a dual sector university, where systems gave priority to Higher Education (HE) needs rather than VET. Enrolment and administration systems were seen as part of the compliance regime that was primarily developed to respond to audit needs. VET practitioners indicated that some contradictory practices meant that they ended up blamed if student demands were not met.

A common example given by interview participants indicated that more complex compliance systems meant that students could not always get a response they felt was quick enough. Enrolment processes and online access as well as the completion of documents that students

required for post study job interviews were some of the examples. With many students needing to work, any delays in receiving completion documentation, no matter how reasonable from an administrative point of view, resulted in VET practitioners being seen as inefficient or unhelpful. 'Uni doesn't liaise with [VET] teachers to set up processes that are helpful for the teacher', explained an interview participant. Compliance systems have a focus on audit requirements and were seen as based on HE and compliance needs, not those of the TAFE division at Eastern University. This created difficulty for VET practitioners and a sense of being part of a lower priority venture.

Knowledge expertise

Data collected in the interviews revealed a dichotomy in the contradictory ways in which VET practitioners understood their identity. On the one hand a great deal more expertise is required by Eastern University from them in relation to RPL, industry and classroom delivery and resource development as well as technology skills. VET practitioners reported needing to be 'good at everything'. This requirement would appear to be growing from the institution's perspective; however, in some ways the easy access to internet information renders them at the same time less expert. Students challenge VET practitioner subject matter expertise in learning environments with what they have gathered from the internet and yet at the same time VET practitioners are required to be more expert. 'I think the role has become a facilitator role' said one participant. 'The teacher is now no longer the knowledge expert'. The participant indicated that 'quality standards AQTF 2007 (AQTF, 2013) drive changes' in the way Eastern University needed to respond to students.

Changing compliance requirements

Asked to identify significant consequences of changing compliance requirements, practitioners identified greater requirements for individual student processes at Eastern University. In addition, a contributing factor participants identified was the competitive funding model that has in part promoted greater use of online learning. The development of some online learning and compliance processes, therefore, was understood by participants to be driven by financial considerations given the smaller unit cost once the online resources were developed. Each student has their own journey forcing 'TAFE to put up a lot of things on line; it's not cost effective to have one teacher to one student to cater for each individual learning plan', reported a participant. While acknowledging that online learning was also related to student access and flexible delivery models, participants identified that compliance issues relating to online learning and early student engagement could increase VET practitioner workload. In some cases online access was not achieved in a timely manner, requiring additional documentary evidence to be generated by the VET practitioner.

The use of standardised online tools for learning was seen to have particular difficulty, in that while some tools are very sophisticated, well designed and eminently suited for their purpose, others were not. The perception from VET practitioners was that the driving force for these practices was financial and extra workloads driven by increasing external compliance processes contributed to the continuing shift to online delivery. The implication reported by participants related to the reduction in using their teaching skills, as these were not required in the administrative tasks that continue to encroach on their time. One participant identified AQTF 2007 (AQTF, 2013) standards implementation as a significant moment of change, some of which were handled positively and others not.

Individual student learning

Participants commented on the way that students are managed through individual learning

plans and just in time learning strategies. While the adult learning principles underpinning these compliance practices were applauded, at the same time it has increased the complexity of compliance processes and workload for individual VET practitioners. The same issue of increased compliance workload was highlighted in relation to Recognised Prior Learning (RPL) that must be done before students commence study. The burden of compliance and managing this organisational risk was identified by participants as falling on them.

Participant data indicates that increased workload related to compliance systems requires increased administrative tasks and VET practitioners experience a performative environment that requires them to 'be good at everything'. One participant reported that some VET practitioners at Eastern University 'simply gave up and left'.

Compliance versus best practice.

Participants indicated that the compliance regime was strongly focused on the need to 'adhere to compliance rules' and pass accreditation audits and, therefore, best practice took a secondary position to the needs of compliance systems. While many compliance systems could be identified as aimed at proving good practice their operation did not always result in that outcome. In fact the symbiotic nature of risk management and risk generation are seen in the generation of more compliance systems attempting to create good practice that end up driving increasing workload and consequently add further risk to quality teaching delivery.

Discussion

In general it would appear that the data highlights a number of rapid changes experienced by VET practitioners at Eastern University that have created an uncertain environment. This supports the research trends reported by Harris, Simons and Clayton (2008) that VET practitioners' roles have experienced significant expansion and diversification, with no increase in numbers of full-time staff to support extra administrative and management components within teaching roles: 'Teachers have to do more yet have fewer resources to draw on' (p. 34). The ideal of the 'New VET Professional' (Smith, 2010) and growing industry and commercial compliance responses in the TAFE division at Eastern University create a high-risk endeavour shared by all stakeholders (Guthrie, 2009, 2010).

Challenge and resistance to compliance systems and practices at an individual level may develop as a response to the coercive and disciplinary practices used to manage the risk of unwanted outcomes and behaviours (Blackmore & Sachs 2007; Scott, 2001). At a structural level the culture of an educational institution may not correspond to the compliance systems in operation thus creating resistance, stress and incongruence as participants revealed. Universities have traditionally operated from a normative and symbolic reward compliance system that is currently colliding with an increasingly calculative educational environment, consequently causing dissonance and disrupting congruent organisational function (Etzioni, 1961; Scott & Marshall, 2009). Compliance to organisational practices may be regularly and routinely accepted as natural, justified or expedient, and therefore, according to Butler (1999), Renn (2008) and Blackmore and Sachs (2007), internalised and not questioned. Consequently, the resulting performative environment can create a reification of the compliance system instituting the necessity to invest substantial amounts of time in its acquittal that inevitably conflicts with teaching and learning practice, creating anxiety (Black & Reich, 2010; Lumby, 2009).

Some VET practitioners break free from these constraints through boundary crossings and collaborative innovations that spring up within Eastern University and in partnership with

other agencies in ways that demonstrate White's (2010) call to speak 'over' performativity rather than speak 'back'.

Clearly, the increasing compliance workload and the number of tasks that VET practitioners report having to undertake increase anxiety and may simply be impossible to maintain long term with traditional practices and quality requirements. Administrative support has moved from being somewhat internally focussed on the requirements of VET practitioner teaching and learning to outward looking and focussed on complying with organisational strategic needs and external review and audit requirements (Guthrie, 2010). These changes are part of the many challenges in VET and have resulted in more course compliance and administration work being pushed back onto individual VET practitioners, much of it unfunded (Harris, Simons, & Clayton, 2005.) Compliance in VET is a heterogeneous reflection of the need to manage the complex risk environment. The individualisation and casualisation of the workforce in VET environments also reflects Beck's (1992, 2002, 2009) risk society analysis and the forces of globalisation. All of which reflect the cascading effects of a world in which risk has become a primary exchange (Beck, 1992, 2002).

A paradigm shift has therefore occurred in the vocational educator's role, moving from expert practitioner to learning manager (Lash, Szerszynski, & Wynne, 2001). There is now a conflation of these differing role concepts, alongside increasing uncertainty, growing risk compliance and complexity within the sector (Mitchell & Ward, 2010). It is evident in strategies that are built on compliance systems that control the parameters of learning in an attempt to contain the outcomes and limit risk. Compliance systems impact on VET practitioner identity through a narrowing of practitioner repertoire as much more is prescribed in relation to learning and assessment strategies (Grace, 2005; DEEWR, 2012). Grace (2005) identifies these tenancies as a displacement of the VET practitioners' professional authority. This preliminary research identifies compliance systems as a risk for VET practitioner identity in times of change and uncertainty.

Burns (2002) and Davids' (2008) contention that vocational education as a public good has been supplanted in favour of containing neo-liberal anxieties regarding the potential risk to industry and business of failing to maintain an inexpensive, reliable, flexible and skilled workforce has some resonance. Beyond these extra demands, claims from a study by Davids (2008) found that 'teachers were not being fully utilised, their sense of purpose, their personal and professional identity and accompanying value system have not yet been fully integrated into the changing VET environment' remain (p. 19). Performative environments created by compliance systems may lead to a devaluing of VET practitioner values (Ball, 2000, 2003). The performative environment itself may have the capacity to change the performance of individual VET practitioner identity and, more significantly some would argue, change their sense of identity itself - 'who they are' (Ball, 2003, p. 215). Risk in this setting can stifle diversity and positive change, or liberate it. VET practitioners may need professional development to engage with theoretical foundations of their 'professional performance' so that they can negotiate performative environments driven by compliance systems.

The impact of risk continues to cascade down to the individual VET practitioner level where compliance systems must be relied upon to ensure that 'evidence is produced' to demonstrate that risk management strategies are acquitted (Misko & Halliday-Wynes, 2009, p. 6). Risk theory's process of individualisation explicates the growing and significant shift of risk responsibility onto the individual VET practitioner (Beck, 1992; Canzler, Kaufman & Kesselring, 2008). According to risk theory these trends are likely to continue and accelerate

increasing workload and potential disconnection to VET practice (Beck, 2002). This juxtaposes VET practice with administrative and compliance processes and requires reflexivity to balance these competing forces. Nonetheless, many VET practitioners experience immense satisfaction in supporting educational development in the life trajectory of their students by facilitating a pathway of ongoing study and learning, some of which is made possible through formal compliance pathways within Eastern University (University of Ballarat, 2010).

Compliance systems and the accompanying processes are, on the one hand, an outworking of power and control and an involuntary devolution of control over risks to produce a standardised outcome. Yet, VET practitioners may challenge this and use the processes as a means to benchmark their teaching, learning knowledge and practice in productive ways (Mitchell, 2008b). Some of these processes operate through validation and moderation requirements that are simultaneously compliance tasks and platforms for the exercise of professional judgement and intellectual debate, which may be both engaging and rewarding for VET practitioners (Davids, 2008; Mitchell, 2008a; Mitchell & McKenna, 2006).

Conclusions

The research so far has provided preliminary indications that risk is a significant catalyst for compliance systems that in turn potentially create performative environments. Many influences coalesce in the context of Eastern University TAFE division to create an environment that is sensitive to external changes in the VET sector. These influences include those of globalised economies and diversifying workplace responses within Australia.

The responses from participants indicate that VET research must contend with a period of rapid change and increasing diversity in VET practitioner identity. Researchers are confronted with global events and trends that are difficult to anticipate. Beck's (1992, 2002, 2009) risk society analysis provides a framework within which to frame VET institutions and compliance systems.

Clearly, many existing practices are increasingly challenged when attempting to meet the needs of a globalised and competitive marketplace. It is evident that VET practitioners occupy a highly contested educational space and as such are exposed, as are many educators and teachers, to challenges in maintaining their sense of professional judgement and identity. Goffman's metaphor of performance allows VET practitioners and researchers to critique and examine the underlying risk amelioration strategies that impact upon VET professional practice. In this way the notion that the compliance driven performative environment not only changes 'what we do' but 'who we are' carries with it the potential for innovation and professional growth, through reflexive performance.

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