

Are TAFE Institutes as Learning Organisations changing the experience for teachers?

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Abstract

TAFE institutes operate in a world where the nature of work is changing rapidly, demanding flexibility, greater knowledge and a higher level of skills. Educational institutions are in the process of adapting to these demands with an acknowledgement that their graduate students must demonstrate the attributes of lifelong learning. The responses of TAFE institutes include research initiatives, a greater emphasis on outcome-based learning, a revision of assessment procedures and reviews of curriculum. TAFE institutes are also responding to the impacts of global change and the emerging knowledge economy by embracing the concept of the learning organization and making policy shifts to reflect their aspiration to move towards this concept. There is a convergence between the notion of 'lifelong learning' and the notion of 'the learning organization' in the recognition that workers and professionals need to learn and develop continually in the context of their workplace, rather than simply through a series of outside courses. However, whereas TAFE institutes are introducing policies in relation to learning organizations, and are beginning to focus training around the notion of lifelong learning for their students, there appears to be a gap between the idea and reality in relation to their own staff. Awareness of the shift in policy and the aspiration towards becoming a learning organization should infiltrate at every echelon of a TAFE institute for this policy shift to succeed. According to Marsick and Watkins, "No one person working alone ... can implement what is needed to create a learning organization" (Marsick and Watkins 1999). This paper draws on research as part of my PhD with data collected from senior and middle managers, and TAFE teachers at two TAFE institutes (I have one other TAFE Institute to complete). Preliminary data analysis reveals a gap between the vision at the top and the reality in the wider teacher cohort.

This paper seeks to describe the research being undertaken and to discuss the implications of preliminary data analysis.

Introduction

In 1988 I walked into Western Metropolitan College of TAFE to commence teaching. I had completed a Business Studies qualification the year before, had never stood in front of a class except to deliver a presentation to fellow students, and had been given only 24 hours notice that I had a class to teach.

I had been reassured by the Head of Department that I would cope, and that if I needed to collect myself in front of the class, I could suggest they write a page about themselves so I could get to know them. I had been so inveigled I didn't really feel anxious – until they'd finished writing their page on themselves. We had a text book to follow, chapter by chapter, with exercises for class activities and homework. I found the students started talking amongst themselves, clearly unsure about how this learning was relevant to them.

I sought advice and was given a book to read "From Tears to Teaching". And so commenced my self-training in effective teaching.

This story would be unfamiliar to commencing TAFE teachers today. The benefits of student centred learning and the incorporation of the principles of adult learning into Vocational Education and Training (VET) delivery are now widely acknowledged. Minimum teaching qualifications for VET professionals have been introduced under the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), and the VET sector has developed curriculum specific to training VET teachers.

However, the picture is not all rosy. Frustration still haunts the corridors of TAFE Institutes and change fatigue is a common grievance. Change has dominated the VET sector for than a decade and the introduction of quality standards under the AQTF has loaded VET professionals with the responsibility for excellence in their teaching practice. TAFE Institutes are implementing not only Training Packages, but also the AQTF quality and reporting requirements, and flexible delivery using new technology. There is increased pressure from funding bodies to grow commercial activity and in Victoria some institutes have merged with higher education (university) partners, imposing issues of duplicated management and obligations to two sets of funding and regulation bodies. TAFE Institutes who concentrate solely on surviving these changes are likely to achieve mediocre success in the short term, but for fundamental change to occur, TAFE Institutes must strive to adopt the principles of a learning organisation.

Literature review

Since 1990 and the publication of “The Fifth Discipline” (Senge 1990) Peter Senge’s vision of a learning organization as a group of people who are continually enhancing their capabilities to create what they want to create has been deeply influential (www.infed.org 2004). The amount of literature on the topic of the learning organization indicates it is a concept that is widely embraced and accepted as a sound basis for successful management practice in general business and policy forming areas. Research in the education sector has incorporated study of the educational institution as a learning organisation (Angus & Seddon 2000), and indeed, Peter Senge has written a book titled “Schools that Learn” (Senge 2000).. Nonetheless, no comprehensive study of TAFE Institutes has been undertaken to quantify the extent of understanding of, commitment to, and experiences of the TAFE institute as a learning organization.

According to Peter Senge (1990: 3) learning organizations are:

“...organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”

What does this mean? According to Kofman and Senge (1993) a learning organization is one that continuously adapts to a changing and interdependent environment. In order to achieve this, we have to make shifts in how we think and interact in the workplace. We have to move from guarding our territory in a competitive manner to understanding that sharing our creativity will double or triple what we can achieve together. We must concentrate on building learning

communities by shifting our reactionary beliefs to focus on co-operative behaviour. Many management teams believe this can be achieved by designing a corporate culture.

Corporate culture is a broad term used to define the unique personality or character of a particular company or organization, and includes such elements as core values and beliefs, corporate ethics, and rules of behavior (Hansen 2006). Designing a corporate culture does not necessarily involve an understanding of the interdependence of staff in an organization. Management teams will spend months, sometimes years, designing a corporate culture and summarizing that culture in a mission statement or strategic policy. Assisting staff to understand this corporate culture and to practice the dictates of the strategic policy will not alone assist the organization to move towards becoming a learning organisation. Building learning organizations requires basic shifts in how we think and interact. (Kofman et al 1993)

Kofman et al ask questions about confronting learning opportunities with fear rather than wonder, as we instinctively did as a child. They also ask why it is that we derive our self-esteem from knowing as opposed to learning and why we criticize before we even understand what it is we're criticizing. All of us, if we examine ourselves, can identify with these questions. Fear of being labeled as uninformed stops us from asking the very questions that could enlighten our creativity and enhance our standing in the eyes of our colleagues. How many tales could we all tell of how we've quickly criticized an innovation or decision without having examined the rationale, simply because we feel threatened? Assisting team members to understand that we live in a world of inter-dependence is crucial in the quest to becoming a learning organization, and this is not necessarily going to be achieved through the design of a corporate strategy. Without communities of people genuinely committed to changing their basic reactionary beliefs, we will not be creating an opportunity for moving forward.

Senge (1990) states that our organizations work the way they work, at the end of the day, because of how we think and how we interact. He states that workers must examine how they think about their jobs. They must become aware of deep-seated suppositions they may not even know they have that can inhibit their performance or blind them to opportunities. Senge says that only by changing how we think can we change deeply embedded policies and practices. Only by changing how we interact can shared visions, shared understandings and new capacities for co-ordinated action be established.

Senge (1993) states that shared visions, shared understandings and new capacities for co-ordinated action are features of a professional learning community. The literature on professional learning communities (Hord 1997) repeatedly gives attention to five attributes of such organizational arrangements: supportive and shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values and vision, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice.

In her paper "Professional Learning Communities: What Are They And Why Are They Important?" Shirley Hord (1997) reports on a summary of a literature review she undertook, where the following results for staff have been observed as a result of participation in a professional learning community:

- reduction of isolation of teachers
- increased commitment to the mission and goals of the school and increased vigor in working to strengthen the mission
- shared responsibility for the total development of students and collective responsibility for students' success
- powerful learning that defines good teaching and classroom practice and that creates new knowledge and beliefs about teaching and learners
- increased meaning and understanding of the content that teachers teach and the roles they play in helping all students achieve expectations
- higher likelihood that teachers will be well informed, professionally renewed, and inspired to inspire students
- more satisfaction, higher morale, and lower rates of absenteeism
- significant advances in adapting teaching to the students, accomplished more quickly than in traditional schools
- commitment to making significant and lasting changes and
- higher likelihood of undertaking fundamental systemic change.

Methodology

This research is undertaken as part of my PhD and it focuses on leadership, vision, and the experience for teachers. It does not focus around professional learning communities, but rather seeks to establish what teachers understand a learning organization to be and whether they feel they make a contribution to the TAFE Institute becoming a learning organisation. It also seeks to establish whether the vision promoted by a TAFE Institute in a strategic policy and mission statement impacts on those in teaching departments.

This research is taking place at three Victorian TAFE institutes. The three TAFE institutes are case studies of progression towards organizational learning. Yin (1994) defines a case study as "...an empirical enquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, when the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident, and in which multiple sources of evidence are used. It is particularly valuable in answering the who, why and how questions in management research." The case study methodology approach is being used to gather data with which to develop grounded theory on TAFE Institutes becoming learning organizations.

In Victoria, there are 20 dedicated TAFE institutions and university TAFE divisions offering VET-accredited programs. The sector accounts for more than 70 per cent of the state's post-secondary education enrolments – approximately 350,000 students. The diversity within the network of TAFE institutes led me to choose to study three TAFE institutes who operate under different criteria:

- a dual sector metropolitan TAFE institute which may be impacted by its close association with its higher education partner.
- a single sector metropolitan TAFE institute to understand the impact of autonomy and a diverse geographic spread. Modern TAFE institutes are multi campused and are often geographically widespread and diverse. Some of them

have student numbers topping 50,000. Often metropolitan TAFE institutes have regional campuses.

- a regional TAFE institute. Regional institutes usually have smaller numbers of students with a wide geographic spread of campuses. Their role in the communities in which they operate is often more crucial than in metropolitan areas.

To date, data has been collected in a metropolitan dual sector TAFE Institute (TAFE A) and a metropolitan single sector TAFE Institute (TAFE B). Questionnaires have been completed by teachers and interviews have been conducted with both CEOs and senior and middle managers. I think it beneficial to speak of my experience as a developing researcher. My initial approaches to CEOs of TAFE Institutes by letter seeking permission to undertake research within their organization were met with refusals. I decided I had to be more pro-active in my approach, so I approached one of the two CEOs mentioned in this paper at a conference at which he was a guest speaker. His response was encouraging and supportive. It should be understood a novice generally enters the field of research in awe of experienced researchers whose ability to extract information and whose style of writing and presenting findings is sophisticated and informative.

I approached the teachers in these TAFE Institutes confident of their co-operation. Hoping to manifest expert skills in my initial research exploit, I was struck down in a fit of despair when the very teachers I hoped to serve were reluctant to participate, some even suspicious of the value of the research and my ability to convert their contribution to a format which would be respected in the wider VET world. Some strategies of encouragement clearly needed to be employed.

My first strategy consisted of a bribe – a sought after chocolate bar for those willing to accept a questionnaire to take away and complete. Whilst the questionnaire was willingly accepted, the bribe did not guarantee the questionnaire would be completed and returned to me. This experience took place in the Building and Construction Department at TAFE A. I received only three completed questionnaires out of 23 distributed. However, it must be noted that the response to my request for interviewees was met enthusiastically with 9 teachers volunteering for interview. This result aligns with my experience in training VET Professionals where teachers of ‘the trades’ feel more comfortable with speaking rather than writing.

My second approach was to the Finance Department of TAFE A. This resulted in a suggestion from the HoD that the questionnaire be completed in a staff meeting. The questionnaire was duly completed by all staff members and returned to me on the spot. This method also allowed for direct feedback from staff as they considered the questions and added comments they found easier to speak about than write about. This method also resulted in 4 teachers expressing their wish to participate in an interview.

For my third experience I opted to attend a staff meeting at TAFE B and asked for the questionnaires to be completed in the meeting. The HoD agreed, but I found members of staff to be distrustful of me and uncooperative, with one teacher

expressing her doubt about the research and indicating her conviction that it would “collect dust on a shelf somewhere”. There were no expressions of interest in being interviewed. When I interviewed the relatively new HoD, I was impressed by her knowledge of the industry, management skills and passion for her staff and students, and I found it difficult to relate this to the attitude of her staff. I am in the process of seeking interviews with three teachers who were not present at the staff meeting, and I have been assured of their willingness to be part of this research. I have since attended staff meetings in other departments but do not find it necessary in this paper to comment on my further experiences.

Findings and Discussion

The questionnaire for teachers is designed to expose the lifelong learner within the teacher. This is done through the use of questions utilizing the leichart scale followed by open ended questions. Most teachers recognize the term ‘learning organisation’ and few have not heard the term before. Ninety per cent of the teachers questioned described themselves as lifelong learners. However 35% of the teachers do not feel supported by their TAFE Institutes in their quest for lifelong learning.

These 35% of teachers are clustered in departments (such as Building and Construction) and they cite lack of time and opportunity to undertake Professional Development (PD) as part of the problem. PD opportunities are advertised and there is an expectation that teachers will undertake a certain amount of PD each year. However lack of back-fill for classes and an expectation that PD will be undertaken in the teacher’s own time, means the reality is that it is often not taken up.

From a manager’s point of view, when asked “how do you encourage teachers in your department to be lifelong learners?” one states “I focus on those doing nothing – they are hardest to move”. She then stated she probably doesn’t do it (encourage) enough as ‘it is much easier to work with those who want to learn’. When asked about her own opportunity for learning, this HoD states it is because one pushes for what he/she wants that one eventually gets support. “Sometimes, it would be nice to be asked or given the opportunity to do something new instead of having to ask. Basically it is up to the individual”. It is interesting to note that the teachers within this department felt supported in becoming lifelong learners. Perhaps this manager gives what she feels she doesn’t receive.

When asked about sharing knowledge and skills within the Institute, one HoD blames a lack of sharing of expertise on internal competition between departments.

“There is too much competition and it is this competition, or perception of ownership, which isolates sections (depts.) rather than sharing the skill and knowledge many people have. The silo approach at (TAFE A) really does not support the notion of a learning organization. There is expertise everywhere not being tapped into.”

As stated in the literature review, guarding our territory in a competitive manner is seen by Kofman and Senge (1993) as a barrier to becoming a learning organization.

One teacher states:

“The only way you will find out anything is to learn about it yourself or you will only be told what they think you need to know or what they think you should know in there (sic) opinion”. This particular staff member described his own contribution towards the Institute becoming a learning organization as “Bang your head against a brickwall for 20 years”.

Another teacher in the same department describes a different experience:

“A lot of these (*decrease in student applications, loss of profile hours, changes in SBNAs*) are mentioned in department meetings. The department meetings include everyone including sessionals.”

The CEO of TAFE A is very aware of some staff being bound up in their own work unit and understands that this is what is of value to them. This is where they come everyday to do their work. He feels that whilst formal communication is plentiful within the University (University Newsletter, frequent emails from the Vice Chancellor, staff meetings etc.) it is often ignored and goes unread or unheard, leading to a feeling of isolation. The use of an Institute wide survey mechanism has highlighted the instance of informal communication by teachers as a means of discovering what’s going on in other departments. Informal communication as a valuable means of staying informed is often overlooked by teachers as not being ‘of the university’. However, it is strongly encouraged and highly valued by the University in bringing about change. Change is not seen as optional by management, and TAFE teachers often confuse change with work overload. This CEO believes change management is partly driven by the industrial relations award (MECA) and partly driven by the dual sector nature of the University. The strategic plan of the university contains five commitments which emphasise a dedication to the community it serves, and the TAFE sector works closely with the vice chancellor to ensure these commitments are achieved by the whole university.

Initiatives in change management

An interview with a senior manager at (TAFE B) revealed a documented strategy for bringing about change. This change involved shifting reactionary beliefs. She believes the Institute must have a vision for the future and must give teachers a reason to be part of that vision. Initially as a senior manager she felt she shouldn’t be involved in team meetings but she came to realize she had to be the change agent in order to influence department heads. This change strategy involved describing the bigger picture and explaining where each department and individual sits within that environment. Next she broadened horizons by bringing together two separate departments - one department had current industry experience and the other was entrenched in the Institute environment. She then instigated weekly team meetings to strengthen communication and sharing of expertise between departments. Identifying role clarity took place through studying the MECA award as a group and becoming familiar with T1-T4 positions. Workshops were undertaken where teachers with recent industry experience shared industry behaviour and expectations, and where the values espoused in the Institute’s strategic plan were discussed. She involved staff in recruiting new staff and involved them in panel interviews to give them a sense of ownership in the department. This manager was also successful in gaining TAFE

Development Centre funding to get several teachers back into industry on a 20 day program. This manager also spoke about the external factors influencing change.

Funding is stated as an external factor which strongly influences when and how change occurs within a TAFE Institute. Survival through the growth of private RTOs has seen TAFE B tender for funding which is then brokered out to private RTOs. This is seen as a win-win situation for both the TAFE Institute and the private RTO. Assisting teachers to comprehend the reasoning behind this brokerage and to understand that it's okay to make money is difficult if teachers have been entrenched in the Institute for a long time. Another factor which has brought about a fundamental shift in thinking is undertaking evaluation through focus groups involving students, aligned with the strategic plan of TAFE B.

Analysing, measuring and setting improvement targets is foremost in the strategic plan espoused by the CEO of TAFE B. External facilitators were used to ensure a mission which captured community service values and the values of all members of the Institute. Extensive leadership development workshops were used to align PD back to the strategic plan. All managers were directed to write the Institute's values into all job descriptions, with bonuses attached to strategic aims of the Institute. All department plans have specific performance targets. This CEO understands change produces unease amongst staff, and that there are remnants of the 'old culture' in TAFE Institutes manifested through an ageing workforce and industrial awards which restrict work to a set number of hours. He feels student centred learning is not served well by the current industrial award and whilst there must be checks and balances against unreasonable work loads, student centred learning requires a different approach and an updated method of weighing contribution. To this end he has instigated a process of asking staff to record their private contributions to their communities, both socially and financially, and he publicly records three outstanding staff contributions in a published report, thereby highlighting the worth of staff contributing to the values of the Institute in their own time.

Conclusion

Whilst this research is still a work in motion, no final deductions can be reached until the research data is collected in total. What we can see from the analysis which has been undertaken on the preliminary data, is that both CEOs of the two TAFE institutes studied are passionate about driving their TAFE institutes' change plans and ensuring their institutes become student centred and outcomes based. Both have a commitment to Vocational Education and Training as a means for bringing about change within our community.

Within the departments of these institutions, there is some confusion about how this change is being implemented and the individual's role in this. It is also becoming apparent that departmental disciplines have an influence on a teacher's participation in the change process, along with the communication process as it is perceived.

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