VET EDUCATORS: VOICES FROM THE STORM

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Abstract

Industry demands, social and community interests, an increase in youth unemployment and economic requirements merge to become a part of a complex interplay that surrounds the field of vocational education and training. Recent calls for a vocational education system that provides value for money to the taxpayer and meets the needs of industry has launched renewed debate and increased the focus on vocational education. Teaching and learning is progressively scrutinized, issues of assessment, quality and evaluation are in the spotlight. Many challenges face vocational education in the modern era; most essentially notions of purpose and identity.

As debates open, and the position and positioning of vocational education in New Zealand is considered, the voice of educators and those 'at the coal-face' remain in the background. Notions of the purpose of vocational education from the perspective of those most deeply involved are lost in the foray.

This paper explores the background for a small pilot study that considers notions of vocational education as perceived by educators in VET. Of particular interest are those involved in trade and pre-trade programmes. The pilot study intends to explore responses from educators in terms of notions of vocational education; its purpose and in terms of students, curriculum and practice. The purpose of the study is to explore some of the conceptualizations of VET and VET practice. The study seeks to unravel the identity of VET and within VET taking into account the educational context of students, curriculum and practice.

This paper explores the idea that fragmented notions of identity within VET have resulted in a silent space within the debate around which issues of ownership and control take place. Such a space might be filled with legitimate perspectives (Habermas, 1984) that contribute to a notion of VET for the new era.

The paper considers the challenges for the construction of identity for VET and within VET while reflecting on the theme for the 2010 AVETRA conference, Leading and Responding in Turbulent Times.

Introduction

In his recent Speech to Parliament, Prime Minister John Key called for a vocational education and training system that provides improved value for money (Key, 2010). The Industry Training Federation responded with a Media Statement outlining how it is best placed to offer a 'cost-effective', 'value for money' tertiary system that can match skills to industry (Baker, 2010). It is suggested by the Industry Training Federation that the sector needs a process whereby tertiary education is targeted to the needs of industry (Jeremy Baker, 2010). Tertiary vocational education appears once again in a struggle for ownership and control.

This is not a new struggle for the sector; encounters between policy makers, industry and providers are continuous and ongoing. Vocational education is accustomed to changing its bearing in response to shifts in focus. New Zealand is portrayed as one of the most ambitious in terms of tertiary education reform in the OECD (McLaughlin, 2003). This is a sector that has been described as constantly undergoing significant and frequent policy change through 'radical reform agendas', (McLaughlin, 2003). The frequency of change creates a continual opening for the struggle of ownership and control.

As the government seeks to develop a skilled and knowledgeable base for the knowledge-based society and attempts to respond to youth unemployment; and as industry responds to skills shortages and institutions to increased scrutiny for funding, vocational educators ride a sea of constantly shifting eddies; they navigate the currents of economic imperative, social needs and industry requirements. The turbulence created by these eddies often override a course charted.

There are opposing notions as to whom vocational education should serve. There exists a complex interplay between skills for the workplace, social capital, and social and economic imperatives (Balatti, Black, & Falk, 2009). Vocational education is easily 'captured', remodelled and reorganised. Linked as it is to economic drives it is 'tinkered with' on a regular basis and seen as a way to alleviate society's perceived ills: young people disengaged from formal education, school leavers with low grades or 'dropouts', high youth unemployment, perceived deficiencies in literacy and numeracy, skill shortages in industry and knowledge gaps for employment - all seek remediation through the vocational education environment: Notions around purpose - what vocational education does, for whom and how vary and alter. There is not a clear and consistent frame or indication of agreement.

Immersed as it is in issues of self interest, tertiary level vocational education is located in a complex ever-changing and often-charged environment. Indeed, this inquiry is steeped in an arena that is intensely political. Vocational education attempts to serve all – students, parents, employers, and industry, community, and social and political agendas.

The voices of industry and policy are often heard in the contest for VET. Industry related standards, assessments, courses and course materials reflect an industry skill-related rationale. Policy initiatives shift between the function of vocational education to ameliorate increasing youth unemployment, develop and enhance literacy and numeracy, increase vocational and industry skill levels, respond to labour force planning and provide economic value for money. Concerns about the number and type of qualifications, value for money and skill levels of graduates are regularly played out in the media.

Ensuing debates that surround vocational education in New Zealand signify that clear and specific notions of its purposes and nature are not widely agreed upon. Underlying this are seemingly irreconcilable philosophical differences that stem from disparate positions on the perceived task of vocational education to deliver and function as an economic, educational or social utility.

Vocational educators within the milieu of vocational education have specific and often unarticulated notions of their work. Despite the complexities and the turbulence surrounding their work many will conceptualise their work in terms of their craft and its contribution to wider society. It is suggested that trade educators make meaning of their work daily and that these untapped notions are the 'hole' waiting to be filled, within debate. It is suggested that through the construction of 'occupational identity' (Seddon, 2008), the identity and purpose of vocational education can emerge.

Literature Review

Research suggests that there are some clear trends facing the current vocational education and training (VET) sector globally. These impact particularly on the work of the educator, what they do, who for and how. These include the change in the culture of the student body (Adams & Gamage, 2008; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005) dramatic technological advances (Hillier, 2009) the need for multicultural diversity (Adams & Gamage, 2008; Marginson, 2000) and the ever-changing market place (McElvey et al, 2001). Most particularly teaching and learning has become progressively scrutinized (Lumby, 2001 as quoted in Adams and Gamage, 2008).

In addition to such global trends, there are a number of forces that impact on the work within vocational education in Australia and New Zealand. In particular vocational and trade education is 'heavily burdened by the imposed need for compliance' (Haycock & Kelly, 2009) including, in New Zealand: NZQA and industry related SSBs (Standards Setting Boards), TEC (Tertiary Education Commission), quality assurance processes, external monitoring visits and evaluations as well as internal procedures, many of which are linked to funding mechanisms. These processes and procedures impact most specifically on the work of teachers; on curriculum, course design and teacher practice.

The many and various forces that impact on the work of teaching within VET are reflected in a lack of agreement around terms and terminology relating to vocational education. The term vocational education is by no means clear and references to aspects within the phenomenon are equally murky. It is no surprise that finding agreement about the nature and function of vocational education is difficult. Terms and terminology reflect the differing beliefs and understandings about the nature of vocational education, the role of teaching and the position of students.

 Disagreement over the use of the term 'vocational education' is evidenced by the fact that even in 'Wikipedia' the definition is under dispute (as at 10 February 2010). In general, the term 'vocational education' in New Zealand includes those subject areas that are identified as non-academic. It is often used to refer to practical-based subjects within secondary-schools. It traditionally refers to training and education that is linked to a trade. In the UK vocational education is associated with Further Education, and distinct from Higher Education that is undertaken in a University. In Australia VET (Vocational Education and Training) tends to be undertaken in TAFE (Trades and Further Education) colleges. In New Zealand vocational education typically means skills and work related education and training that is 'non-academic'.

Vocational Education and Training can also belong to the myriad of post-compulsory education possibilities including: foundation education, bridging education, community education, and can be referred to as technical training, trades education, and industry training.

Those involved in teaching within vocational education are referred to by a number of titles including: tutor, lecturer, educator, teacher, instructor and trainer. In New Zealand those involved in industry training through a workplace tend to be nominated 'instructor' or 'trainer'. Those within Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics tend to be identified as either 'tutors' or 'lecturers' and this can depend on the salary scale within which they sit. Some are referred to as academic staff or as facilitators. Much vocational instructional literature refers to 'tertiary teaching' and therefore 'tertiary teachers'; however, for many involved in this area of education/training, the title 'teacher' sits more comfortably as a reference for those within the compulsory sector (Haycock & Kelly, 2009). Plainly this is a fluid role, and in many cases such roles within ITPs (Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics) involve activities that are an amalgamation of the nuances particular to all terms. Those involved in studies or training are can be referred to as students, trainees, learners, and apprentices.

The opportunity for those in the VET workforce to consider their position within the realm of their work is often not available. The task of establishing and developing identity within this realm is fraught with obstacles including time and resources. Furthermore the prospect of considering VET education is daunting; it appears as an ocean that is often impenetrable and constantly moving. Turbulent. For VET educators involved in the multifaceted and ongoing daily task of teaching within their vocation, and negotiating the many forces that impact on their work, the notion of identity and purpose is often not expressed.

Peter Kell (2004) has suggested that for those within vocational education, "The challenge … is to create new notions of professional identity that respond to a new set of education challenges in new times that move beyond a reductionist and instrumental view of teaching and practice" (Kell, 2004). This requires that vocational educators develop an occupational identity (Seddon, 2008) that reflects their role as a teacher/educator which as suggested by Seddon (2008) requires anchoring in order for the kind of innovation outlined by Kell to take place.

A number of factors impact on the acquiring of identity by those involved in teaching within vocational trades or pre-trades education. The label they assume for their work as vocational educators is just one. The idea of being a 'teacher' does not sit comfortably for many as outlined by Haycock and Kelly (2009).

Undeniably, the development of a teaching identity within vocational education takes place in a contested environment within a tertiary institution. Issues relating to 'entryism', conflicting identities, the value given to good teaching, professionalism and qualifications, and the positioning of professional development within an institution are seen to be key challenges affecting the notion of a 'teaching identity' that is collective, anchored, and supports innovation.

Firstly, the motivation for entry into the vocational teaching sector is varied. 'Entryism' is referred to as a 'sliding' in by Gleeson (2005). Interviews by Gleeson, Davis and Wheeler (2005) indicate that the move into teaching can be related to lifestyle changes or choices, rather than necessarily a desire to teach; 'it is less a career choice or pathway than an opportunity at a particular moment in time" (D. Gleeson, 2005 p. 449).

Secondly, the vocational teachers' professional identity as a teacher often takes second place to their identity with their former trade or vocation. (D Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005; Robson, Bailey, & Larkin, 2004). Where vocational teachers identify more closely with their discipline than with their institution (Brewer, 2003) there can be a lack of explicit alignment with the wider goals of teaching and the goals of the profession or vocation. Often, too, teaching comes second to the skills demands relating to the occupational industry or trade. The conflict is compounded when professionalism within an institution is identified as an aspect of managerialism and driven by institutional goals rather than by department or trade initiatives.

Thirdly, Davis (2003) notes that there is little appreciation given to good teaching (Davis, 2003, p. 251). A hierarchy exists within institutions that offer both degree and certificate level courses and trade and professional or semi professional vocations. Such hierarchies can prevent the development of a common identity as 'teacher.' Trades teachers and those involved in pre-trades teaching in ITPs tend to have larger teaching loads than their degree or higher level teaching counterparts. Teaching is still undervalued in tertiary institutions. The role of an educator in many tertiary environments is seen as a 'second best pre-occupation of those unsuccessful in research" (Brewer, 2003).

Fourthly, the topic of professionalization in the vocation and further education sector is a topic much discussed particularly within the United Kingdom, (see for example Gleeson, 2005; Gleeson, Davies, Wheeler, 2005; Robson, 2004; Scott, 2004; Orr 2008). It is suggested that the development of formal qualifications can provide the credentials necessary for the professionalization of teaching at this level (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008) and can improve teaching practice. However, most trades and pre-trades teachers do not have teaching qualifications, and reject the prospect of being identified as a teacher.

Finally, professional development units within tertiary organizations often charged with the task of developing teaching and learning within vocational education are often under-prepared to work with trades' educators. Professional development centres within tertiary institutions tend to be aligned with administrative departments or service units (MacFarlane & Hughes, 2009). Much of their approach is procedural and contained within quality control systems (Carew, Lefoe, Bell, & Armour, 2008; Ramsden, 2008). Very often professional development units are seen as the 'ally of a managerial culture' (Macfarlane & Hughes, 2009) or part of a 'quality industry' (Ramsden, 2008). There is a lack of contextualized support for teachers and the often centralized approach of professional development contributes to a lack of credibility, a strategic resistance for professional development and problems with funding (MacFarlane & Hughes, 2009).

Purposeful consideration of professional identity is necessary for educators and for VET at large. Time and resources at an institutional level are needed to support the development of 'occupational identity'.

While practice comes under increased scrutiny and demands increase, educators rarely have the opportunity to consider not only what they do, but for whom and for what reason.

Research Methods

The proposed pilot study seeks to provide an opportunity for educators to engage with concepts of their work and to discuss their views on curriculum, students and notions of what they do, who for, and how.

Trade and pre-trade educators will be invited to be a part of the pilot study. Data gathering tools include a questionnaire, and participants will choose to be involved in a one-to-one interview or a focus group discussion. Interview and focus group questions will invite VET educators to talk about their experience of vocational education in terms of the curriculum, students and practice. Educators will be asked to consider their role in terms of industry and the skills and knowledge related to their area of trade.

Following the interview or focus group educators will be invited to either 'construct' a model, or draw a plan that represents their work in the field. This is seen as a 'conceptual tool' (Willis & Trondman, 2002 p. 399) and will provide for further discussion through description. Data gathering methods are influenced by Willis and Trondman's Manifesto for Ethnography (2002). They draw specifically on Willis and Trondman's (2002) reference to Bourdieu's quote of Pascal, "I cannot judge of my work, while doing it. I must do as the artist, stand at a distance; but not too far" (p. 399). The goal is to cast 'maximum illumination' (p. 400) on the work of educators by engaging with them in a concrete representation of their work. A period of discursive meaning making will follow as participants and researcher work with the conceptual tool to produce new knowledge.

The impetus for the work is influenced by Habermas' theory of Communicative Action (1981) which seeks to provide an opportunity for legitimate perspectives to be heard. It is envisaged that "presentation of located aspects of the human condition from the inside" (Willis & Trondman, 2002) will expand the debate and fill the gap in terms of notions of vocational education. The goal is to provide for the conditions for reasoned debate as a contribution to the possibility of improved understanding and a more democratic debate in the contested field of vocational education.

It is envisaged that unleashing the voices of vocational educators into debate will contribute to the empathetic environment suggested by Habermas (1998) as a key to developing solutions. In this way notions of vocational education are enhanced and the space within the debate filled with real and 'lived' experience. The goal is to provide an opportunity for active participation in the future of vocational education where communication is opened and where all interested parties and have a voice.

There is no suggestion that we will develop a single, clear or particular notion of vocational education here. However, we may start to articulate notions of vocational education in a way that is informed more widely than by a simple market based lens.

Collecting and recording the ideas and opinions of those effected by policy or changes in political focus is commonly undertaken. Those researched are often those who are most effected by political shifts and changes. What is important is that such ideas have the opportunity to be developed, considered and utilized. Further it is important that such opinions are treated in a way that is meaningful and provides the possibility for an improved future.

Discussion and conclusion

Vocational education has become a vast ocean of qualifications, standards, skills and requirements. In the current tertiary qualifications environment, institutions are compelled to respond to shifting mechanisms for funding, monitoring and evaluation; they are obliged to take into account the needs of industry and engage with regional and community needs through regional strategies. As tertiary institutions respond to educational reforms and various stakeholder concerns, tertiary teachers are involved in a state of ongoing compromise as they seek to negotiate the contexts in which they teach – curriculum, institution and student body.

While requirements and regulations in the tertiary vocational environment change frequently and institutions change tack to account for the shifts in stream, a sea of constant and changing eddies is amassed. Educators become the buffers between student and institution, institution and industry weathering each hurly-burly while watching for the next, looming in the distance. Indeed, vocational education is driven by a continual and ongoing response to the eddies of perceived need, in industry, student requirement, institutional directives and policy initiatives. There is a jostling for position. Riding the eddies and navigating the turbulence has become the way of moving forward in VET. The effect is a reactive and outwardly responsive educational environment through which the process of navigation is littered with hazards.

The place inhabited by VET educators has become engulfed in a quagmire of standards, qualifications, and skills. The current and pervasive notion of vocational education as an imparting of a collection of skills is thin and superficial. As Sitton (2006) suggests, perspectives, gathered from 'inside' will expand the debate as to what is "the case" (Sitton, 2006, p.46). While exploring the different perspectives of educators it is hoped that we will begin to 'flesh out' our understanding of vocational education. The goal is to fill the space in reasoned debate to enhance understanding and develop a wider, more extensive concept about this increasingly important area of education.

Those that currently lead the drive through standards, course requirements, qualifications and labour market planning dominate the direction for vocational education. This part of the field of VET is populated by those involved in the structure, administration and governance for the vocational qualifications environment; it is lead by industry and has as a guiding focus, skills for the labour market. This notion of vocational education as skills and labour market based

overlooks the richness and vastness of knowledge and mastery around the different facets of VET.

Vocational educators who ride the sea of constantly shifting eddies navigate the currents of economic imperative, social needs and industry requirements as part of their work. In this environment each hunkers down to weather the storm and manage the immediacy of the environment. Concerns around direction, ethos and purpose become obscured in the need to simply stay afloat. It is not surprising that vocational education loses its bearings. However, we risk veering off course to the peril of vocational students. Without a set navigational path or the opportunity to chart and consider a clear direction vocational education floats aimlessly and risks being lost at sea.

It is suggested that turbulence can be navigated and direction more directly charted when purpose and ethos is clearly voiced. Engaging with the essence of the work of vocational educators, the subject matter, students and the practices in which they engage can support a conceptualization of VET that is informed according to lived experience.

This then may fill the blank space that emerges when debate around vocational education is entered into. By focusing on the nature of vocational education in terms of what is taught, how it is taught, to whom and why, through the perspective of those most closely involved, the essence of vocational education may begin to emerge.

"A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are built for."
William Shedd (1820-1894)

Acknowledgement

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