Teacher identity and transformation through critical pedagogy: challenges and models of teaching teachers in vocational education and training (VET)

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Abstract

To achieve career advancement in Victoria, teachers of Vocational Education and Training (VET) have historically progressed from the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) to the Diploma in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Practice (21697VIC). Our proposed research will explore the experiences of a small selection of these VET practitioners. As they are encouraged to critique the construction of their learning and subsequent teacher identities, the diploma participants encounter challenging, unknown terrain at the edge of their knowing, in navigating the disorienting dilemmas inherent in the learning journey.

This paper discusses and forms the foundation of proposed research around personal learning, teacher identity and perspective transformation.

The work of a transformative teacher
Is first to help students find the edge of their understanding
Second to be company at that edge
And finally help students construct a new, transformed place.
Ultimately, this process will help students find the courage they need to transform.
Jennifer Garvey Berger (2004)

Introduction

Within the vocational education and training (VET) sector, vocational specialists bring their skills, knowledge and experience gained in industry, and before fully engaging with student practitioners, are required to successfully complete the mandated Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA)[1]. Once competence has been established in foundation 'training', if further career advancement beyond this is sought, teachers in TAFE Institutes in Victoria progress to the Diploma in Vocational Education and Training (VET) Practice (21697VIC)[2]. Typically the enrolled cohort contains a significant percentage of traditional trade teachers, many of whom have not previously studied at diploma level. This paper outlines proposed research that will examine the anecdotally expressed transformative learning experiences of a selection of VET practitioners who completed the Diploma of VET Practice at a Victorian TAFE college between 2006 and 2012.

The theme for the 2013 AVETRA conference is 'VET Research at the Edge: *Training for Diversity and Change*'. Our research seeks to examine the changing perspectives of our participants related to learning and teaching. If, through undertaking the diploma program they begin to see themselves differently as a learner, does that change their view of learning? If they see learning differently, how might that inform their teaching practice?

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[1] Currently TAA40104 orTAE40110

[2] Recently superseded by the Diploma of Vocational Education and Training (TAE50111)

Has it changed the way they now engage with their learners? Has it changed them as a VET practitioner?

The paper first discusses the background of the qualification and professional development as a VET practitioner. Second it briefly reflects on the Diploma of VET Practice model as originally designed; considers Robertson's critique and identified limitations (2009) and outlines the model, founded in critical pedagogy, and developed over time in response to these criticisms and the needs of the cohort. Third and finally, it outlines the proposed research design and methodology to examine the anecdotally expressed transformative learning experiences of the practitioners.

Background

Vocational Education and Training (VET) in Australia is a post-compulsory education system primarily concerned with training for employment. The VET framework is regulated by the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and its components, the principal of which are training packages, which set out the benchmarks for training in VET. Teachers who work in VET are principally industry experts and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF), the precursor of the current National VET Regulations (NVR) directed that they all hold the minimum qualification for VET teaching, the Certificate IV Training and Assessment (Certificate IV TAA) or its equivalent.

The next step for VET teacher training in Victoria was the Diploma of VET Practice (21697VIC) which was designed to fulfil a perceived gap in teacher training for Victorian VET Practitioners. The MECA enterprise agreement[3] required that senior TAFE teachers undertake an AQF level 5 qualification in teaching with a 200 hour supervised teaching practicum. Between 2006 and 2012, the Diploma of Vocational Education and Training (VET) Practice met these criteria[4].

Knowledge at AQF level 5

The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF 2007) determines that graduates at AQF level 5 should: "have developed a broad knowledge base incorporating theoretical concepts with substantial depth in some areas that can be applied to analyse and plan approaches to technical problems or management requirement; be able to evaluate information and use it to forecast for planning or research purposes; be able to transfer and apply theoretical concepts and/or technical or creative skills to a range of situations; take responsibility for their own outputs in relation to specified quality standards: and, take limited responsibility for the achievement of group outcomes" (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board, 2007).

Turner-Bisset (2001, cited in Robertson, 2008, p.8-11) posits that there are Twelve Knowledge Bases of teachers' knowledge, building on the seven categories originally proposed by Schulman (1987, cited in Robertson, 2008, p.8). The twelve are subject knowledge, substantive and syntactic; beliefs about subject; curriculum and general

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[3] Victorian TAFE Teaching Staff Multi Employer Certified Agreement 2003 [Refer clause 19.3.2 and Schedule 5, clause 5] Superseded by the Multi business Agreement (MBA) in 2009

[4] Recently superseded by the Diploma of Vocational Education and Training (TAE50111), yet to be validated by the Australian Education Union (AEU) as meeting the requirements of the MBA

pedagogical knowledge; knowledge of teaching models and learners, empirical and cognitive; knowledge of self; educational contexts and educational ends, purposes and values; and lastly pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) which has been the subject of some discussion in teaching research.

Knowledge base	Code	Summary
Subject knowledge: Substantive	SUB	Content knowledge associated with facts, concepts, models and frameworks
Subject knowledge: Syntactic	SYN	The ways through which propositional knowledge is generated and established.
Beliefs about subject	BEL	Relates to the way in which the teacher understands the history and purpose of the subject or discipline.
Curriculum knowledge	CUR	A broad concept incorporating knowledge of programs and resources developed by government, commercial and other interests.
General pedagogical knowledge	GPK	Generic and largely procedural knowledge about teaching that is gained from and is likely to develop with practice.
Knowledge/models of teaching	MOD	Described as beliefs about what constitutes good teaching practice which is derived from one's own experience as a learner.
Knowledge of learners: Empirical	L-EMP	Relates to criteria such as age, interests, social nature and behavioural patterns.
Knowledge of learners	L-COG	Relates to knowledge of learning theories which inform practice
Knowledge of self	SELF	Combines the personal and the professional. Is important in shaping the way that teachers' perceive their identity and critical to reflection on personal teaching practice.
Knowledge of educational contexts	CON	Knowledge of the settings in which teaching occurs.
Knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values	ENDS	Based on the premise that teaching is a purposeful activity expert teachers are able to make educational ends, purposes and values explicit.
Pedagogical content knowledge	PCK	That knowledge which embeds all other knowledge bases. PCK cannot develop in the absence of any other knowledge base.
Cognitive and contexts[5]		*Specific knowledge of how a particular group of learners respond and behave.*

Figure 1: Turner-Bisset's 12 Knowledge Bases (2001, pp.13-19) cited in Robertson (2009)

Robertson used the Twelve Knowledge Bases to examine the Certificate IV in TAA and concluded that "… the potential for the development of pedagogical content knowledge that differentiates the novice from the expert [teacher] is doubtful" (Robertson, 2008, p.1).

Robertson (2009) again used the twelve knowledge bases to evaluate if completion of the Diploma VET Practice is likely to allow VET practitioners to develop the knowledge bases of professional educators. He found that "… there are ample explicit or implicit

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[5] Present in Robertson's paper, but not outlined in Turner-Bisset's text

opportunities for the development of knowledge bases associated with curriculum, educational contexts, educational ends, learners (empirical and cognitive), and general pedagogic knowledge as they relate to the official requirements of the VET system in all core modules/units. As concluded for the CIV TAA (Robertson, 2008) there is little if any opportunity for critique of this context within the minimum requirements. Opportunity to develop beliefs about teaching, self as teacher or beliefs about subjects is limited…" (p.9). Robertson determined that the program, if implemented with rigor, did provide the bases required of professional teachers. He argued however, that PCK (see Figure 1) is not developed quickly, it requires experience and reflection.

In recognising this shortfall, the diploma model examined in this research was developed over time to address the limitations identified by Robertson, and to meet the needs of the teacher/learners. The program design evolved over a number of years, with each program using evaluation from the previous delivery to improve and respond to recognised shortfalls. Designed to cultivate a safe space where participants are free to critique assumptions of learning and teaching, the diploma model in which these teachers enrolled uses Critical Friends Groups to foster collaborative learning, and rests in a methodology that has at its heart Freire and Shor's Critical Pedagogy (1987) and Mezirow's Transformative Learning Theory (2000). It provides the conditions, focus and opportunity for emerging vocational practitioners to come together with others to explore the learning of their lives, and to critically examine what was previously uncritically seen, known and named. It provides space for new and personally authentic knowing to arise and take root, and supports participants as they navigate the often challenging path to becoming advanced practitioners.

Literature review

Drawing predominantly on the work of Mezirow (2000), Freire & Shor (1972), Brookfield (2005), Cranton (1994), Frankl (1964), Rogers (1980) and Brady (1990), the proposed research explores the personal and social dimensions of meaning-making within the diploma program. It seeks to clarify the role of Critical Friends Groups and critical reflection in creating the conditions where participating teacher/learners can be exposed to the diverse perspectives of their teaching peers. As they are confronted by the challenges of conflicting cultural experiences, attitudes and values of their peers, they have the opportunity to critique the influences and assumptions that have informed their own construction of self-identity as a learner.

As facilitators of this program from 2006 – 2012, it has been observed by us, and articulated by countless Dip VET Practice participants over these years, that participants' perspectives of themselves as learners and teachers transform through this often disorienting, but ultimately rewarding process. As teacher/learners begin to uncover and challenge the mental schemas that have informed their notions of what it is to learn, and consequently how this influences the manner in which they 'teach' or 'train' in response to this, their expressed view of themselves and their place in vocational education begins to change.

Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory is foundational to this process, and Mezirow (2000) frames ten stages … not necessarily sequential … that signpost the transmuting perspective of learners as they undergo transition:

1. A disorienting dilemma – loss of job, divorce, marriage, back to school, or moving to a new culture
2. Self-examination of feelings of fear, anger, guilt, or shame
3. A critical assessment of assumptions
4. Recognition that one's discontent and the process of transformation are shared
5. Exploration of options for new roles, relationships and actions
6. Planning a course of action
7. Acquiring knowledge and skills for implementing one's plans
8. Provisional trying of new roles
9. Building competence and self-confidence in new roles and relationships
10. A reintegration into one's life on the basis of conditions dictated by one's new perspective

Figure 2: The 10 stages of Transformative Learning Theory

Mezirow, in his Transformative Learning Theory (2000), describes the process an individual undertakes, ignited by a disorienting dilemma … a key life event such as losing a job, suffering a life-threatening illness or uncovering a previously unknown personal truth … which leads to the questioning of long-held assumptions about themselves and the world around them. This critically reflective passage seems ultimately to bring about a reassessment, a renewed recognition or a transformed understanding of their ability to engage with and influence the differently perceived world, viewed through the lens of this new perspective. Mezirow suggests that for people on this transformative path of learning, the examination of their subjective experience challenges previously perceived notions of relationship and interaction between the individual's agency (personal power) and external structures (externally imposed environments and influences). This transformed perception can lead to a newly constructed perspective, sense of authorship and influence in one's life (Miles, 2011, 2012)

> *Transformative learning ... the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning perspectives, habits of mind, mind-sets) to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change, and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide actions (Mezirow, 2000)*

The diploma model under examination utilised this methodology that seeks to raise participants' critical consciousness; to provide the space where they can critique the assumptions made about learning and teaching; to seed questions about self; to critically reflect on their responsibility to learners and to provide the opportunity for them to re-examine their positioning and power within the VET sector.

Critical Pedagogy

The concept of critical consciousness, notably promoted by Freire (1972), and further interrogated with Shor (Shor & Freire, 1986) is fostered through an approach to education known as Critical Pedagogy (Shor, 1992). Shor advocates the cultivation of a critically conscious lens across the life span, and joins others (Berger, 2004; Piaget, 1979; Wink, 2011) in challenging a limiting approach that often begins in early learning:

"The child is called upon to receive from outside the already perfected products of adult knowledge and morality; the educational relationship consists of pressure on one side and receptiveness on the other side. From such a point of view, even the most individual kinds of tasks performed by students (such as essay writing, making a translation, solving a problem) partake less of the genuine activity of spontaneous and individual research than of … copying an external model; the students' inmost morality remains fundamentally directed toward obedience rather than autonomy." (Piaget, 1979)

It is the rejection of this mindless acceptance of others knowing and authority that underpins what Mezirow (2000), Freire (1972), Shor (Shor & Freire, 1986), Brookfield (2005) and a chorus of others propose - that through developing a critical consciousness we can come to the place of contesting previously taken for granted 'truths', and find personally authentic meaning amongst the inauthenticities of the ruling frameworks that have been held to be irrefutable. Brookfield (2005) identifies the significance of critical reflection in the transformative learning process as individuals begin to critique the power relationships and assumptions that exist within their immediate and larger environments, coming to identify the political and social dimensions that have influenced their meaning-making. The interrogation of the concept of perceived personal capacity (agency) within an externally constructed and imposed environment (structure) is central to this research.

Autobiographical reflection

Throughout the diploma program, ongoing critical discourse sits alongside quietly introspective moments of personal reflection, fostering a deeply personal inquiry. Ultimately, participants are asked to record the stories of their learning – the barriers and enablers, the successes and seeming failures – and to critically reflect on the formation of their learning identity. For many, this autobiographical reflection can expose disorienting dilemmas that are catalysts to change. Through reflecting on and critiquing their own stories of learning, VET practitioners can gain new perspectives and develop new ways of responding to their learners and learning environments.

Both within the social sciences and more broadly, the use of story/autobiography is gaining acceptance as a valuable tool for cultivating personal and professional growth. This research utilises various interpretive methodologies that work with the concept of autobiographical reflection and meaning-making in adult education. These include interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989), educational biography (Dominice, 2000), biographicity (Alheit, 1995), autobiographical reflection (Kenyon & Randall, 1997), narrative and storytelling (Andrews, Squire, & Tamboukou, 2008; Rossiter, 2002). This study will draw on each of these strands.

Critical Friends and Communities of Practice

Although the path through this autobiographical reflection is ultimately navigated in solitude, the diploma program utilises small groups of teacher/students called Critical Friends Groups (CFGs) to support the successful passage of the individual and the collective. The concepts of collaborative inquiry, critically reflective dialogue and critiquing assumptions about learning and teaching that underpin CFGs are seen as vital to the development of individual and collective practice. Individuals construct meaning through the personal and professional challenges of working cooperatively with others. As they engage with the synergistic benefits of social learning within these environments

(Bandura, 1977) and step through the disorienting dilemmas inherent in transformative learning, a changed perspective of learning and learners emerges. It would appear that diploma participants are:

- Challenged by working with their Critical Friends Groups and the Communities of Practice
- Informed and broadened by working collaboratively within them
- Supported by their peers through the disorienting dilemmas inherent in the learning journey

An interesting feature of the diploma model examined in this research is the high module and course completion rates when compared with other TAFE staff development programs. Participants commonly articulate a strong awareness of identity transformation through the experience, and cite Critical Friends Groups and the communities of practice that emerge as key to their successful completion. As course developers and facilitators, it was observed by us and articulated by some participants that gender balance in CFGs appeared to be a factor that influenced the expressed experience of the cohort. Where gender imbalances existed in CFGs, most notably in all-male groups, the opportunity for exposure to challenging perspectives appeared more limited. It is anticipated that this study may shed some light on these anecdotal findings.

Identity

It has been our observation over the six years of designing and facilitating the Diploma of VET Practice that related to their identity as learner and teacher:

- Some participants find new ways of seeing themselves and their learners, and articulated new ways of engaging with learners, learning and teaching. They identified transformed perspectives of themselves and of those within the environments in which they practiced.
- Other participants found words to describe what they had already been doing, and expressed a transformed perception of themselves and the authority and power they had to create positive change in their environments.
- In many cases words used to describe change included "discovering personal authority", "finding personal power", "permission to do what I've always done (or wanted to do) … different to others"',

The research seeks to examine the validity of these observations and expressions of self-awareness through change. It will challenge the effectiveness of the program design that draws together diverse vocational practitioners in small communities of practice. In a space where they can collaboratively critique the knowing of their own learning and teaching, the teacher/learners have the opportunity to reflect on the construction and consequent embodiment of their identities.

Research question

Our research will seek clarification around the experiences of a small self-selected sample of Dip VET Practice graduates, related to the inquiry:

'In what ways does undertaking a teaching diploma, founded in transformative learning and critical pedagogy, transform teachers' perspectives on learning and teaching?'

The key questions that inform this inquiry will be:

- *Was change in perspective as a learner and teacher experienced through undertaking the Diploma of VET Practice?*
- *If change was experienced, was this related to identity or practice or both?*

Our questions will seek to gather evidence from Dip VET graduates around their experiences past and present using a framework that aims to identify the depth of their experience and applied learning over time.

- How did you experience the process of undertaking the Diploma?
- What aspects of the diploma were most significant? Why?
- What did you learn at the time? (positive and negative, in-class and back in the workplace.)
- Were you able to apply that learning?
- What supported or inhibited that outcome?
- Did your practice change? How?
- Has it influenced the way you see and engage with your learners? How?
- Ultimately, with the passing of time, has it changed you as a practitioner? How? For example, has their experience of CFGs in the teaching diploma influenced the inclusion of CFG in their own classes? Are they employing critical pedagogy in their own classrooms? Are they asking more critical questions of their learners … inviting them along and encouraging them on their own learning quest? How would they now describe their perspectives on learning, learners and teaching?

Research Design

Methodology

Past graduates will be contacted by email and provided with information about the purpose and process of the study, clearly outlining the research focus as seeking to examine the extent to which participants experienced change in identity and/or practice as a result of undertaking the teaching diploma founded in Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning.

Data collection

Using semi-structured interviews, participants will be able to choose from face-to-face or web-based conferencing. If preferred they will also having the opportunity to elect to submit an audio-visual recording of their reflections in response to the questions provided. The interviews will be recorded for transcription.

Opportunities for continuous improvement

As facilitators of the program over six years, one of the challenges of the program was developing the space for transformative learning to unfold against what Erica Smith calls – 'Ticky tacky boxes' (Smith, 2001). The dichotomy of meeting VET's compliance and competency requirements, whilst endeavouring to overlay the framework to foster transformative change, revealed itself through a sometimes tortuous and perplexing path over the six years. Our industry driven VET sector can encourage what Freire scathingly refers to as the 'banking' model of education (Freire, 1972), where students are expected to be passive recipients of the skills and knowledge needed to fulfil the requirements of their job. *"… it (*education*) turns them into "containers," into "receptacles" to be "filled"*

*by the teachers."(Freire, 1972).*Inevitably we had teacher/learners who insistently demanded that their 'buckets' be filled with concrete strategies of how to teach.

Critical pedagogy encourages the discovery and establishment of one's own resonant truth, and as our professional understanding and expertise developed over time as designers and facilitators of the program, and as we claimed our own authentic perspective on learning and teaching, we gradually incorporated critical pedagogy in the design of the course. We also made assumptions about what was possible for the teacher/learners … that learners at this level would take responsibility for their learning and identify, and select and manage the choices and opportunities available to them. It became apparent that for some people and in some circumstances, individuals didn't have the appropriate learning strategies to cope. In recognition of this, we developed strategies to support them in navigating the pathway, adjusting our view of what was possible for them, to promote their ultimate success. This was done to enable a more meaningful engagement with learning that was relevant, resonant and authentic to them and their context.

Learning about teaching is about emerging as a practitioner and being to open to transforming perspectives and strategies for the participants we facilitate … accepting, managing and responding to the diversity of our students. Our own journey through the diploma programs will have influenced the outcomes for the participants at all stages of the program, and it is our expectation that data collected will reflect this emergence on our part.

Further research beyond the scope of this study

Through this proposed research study, we hope to gain information that will provide insight into the effectiveness of the design of the diploma model, founded in Critical Pedagogy and Transformative Learning. What worked? What didn't work? Under what conditions? How and why? Additionally, the findings will inform an overarching institute evaluation of the evolution and success of the various models of diplomas as they emerged over the six year period under examination.

Out of the learning in the diploma program to this point has come a strong recognition that as learners, the sense of identity we hold about ourselves, and the strategies we have developed in response to this knowing are key to our success. The link between Learning - the first Core Skill from the Australian Core Skills Framework - and practitioner success as both learner and teacher has come strongly to the fore. The findings of this study will form a foundation on which PhD research will be undertaken around learning, learner and teacher identity.

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