

TAFE head teachers: Discourse brokers at the management/teaching interface

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Abstract

During the past decade in particular, TAFE, like all public education institutions, has been subject to changes in organisational culture that reflect the competitive, globalised world of business. This 'new work order' (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996) involving the primacy of market forces and competition, structural efficiencies, and the need for teamwork now dominates the new managerial discourse in TAFE institutes. But it is unlikely that this discourse has been accommodated by the majority of teachers in TAFE whose occupational identity is underpinned by values and beliefs associated with their industrial expertise, liberal education tradition, and commitment to the concept of public service (Chappell 1998, Harris, Simons and Clayton 2005).

Head teachers in TAFE are strategically located at the interface between management and teaching as TAFE management attempts to incorporate teachers into this new business-oriented discourse. Head teachers are key people to be won over to the new managerial discourse because they are likely to have considerable influence over the many teachers they supervise. In effect, they become 'brokers' between management and teachers in determining the extent to which the new managerial discourse will be accommodated by teachers. This paper is based on a qualitative research study of eighteen current head teachers in one TAFE NSW institute. It aims to explore the attitudes of these head teachers to several key aspects of the new managerial discourse and the implications these attitudes may have for TAFE.

Background

Discourses of the new work order and TAFE institute management

During the past decade in particular, TAFE (Technical and Further Education), the main public VET provider, has been subject to changes in organisational culture that reflect the competitive, globalised world of business. Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) refer to these changes as the new work order, or the new (or fast) capitalism, a dominant discourse that has transformed private business, and following in its wake, public sector management also (e.g. Exworthy and Halford 1999, Osborne and Gaebler 1993). There is now within TAFE institute management an entrenched set of identity-forming beliefs, values and behaviours (i.e. 'ways of being', see Gee 1999) that are in accord with the dominant managerial discourse of the business world (NCVER 2004). I am using the term discourse in the sense of defining one's reality, of 'ruling in' certain beliefs and ways of talking and conducting oneself and 'ruling out' or restricting other ways (see Grant and Hardy 2003: 6). The new managerial discourse 'rules in' beliefs in the value of market forces, competition, structural efficiencies and the importance of teamwork and it is unlikely that senior or middle managers in TAFE can work outside of these beliefs,

because to do so would make their professional lives untenable. How can managers not have a primary concern in the current environment with generating income, with fee-for-service activities? How can managers not be preoccupied with scarce resources and thus the need for ongoing structural efficiencies (budget cuts)? And the language of managers has changed. How many now refer to 'teams' rather than 'sections' and to 'customers' rather than 'students'? This is the new world of TAFE institute managers, their identities no longer bound by their specialist educational fields. Increasingly, they are generic managers, leaders of teams and driven by entrepreneurialism and customer satisfaction surveys (NCVER 2004).

Managers and teachers: Different discourses, different social identities

Invariably this new managerial discourse is driven from the top down (Harris *et al.* 2001). Institute directors and their senior managers, sometimes with the guidance of contracted 'change agents', set the tone and direction with their strategic planning, frameworks, priorities, vision statements, and goals (see Mulcahy 2003). The aim of course is to transform the whole organisation of TAFE, to bring about cultural change to enable all TAFE personnel to share the beliefs and values of the organisation and to work to the same ends. In the words of Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996:22), the aim is 'to create new kinds of people by changing not just their overt viewpoints but their actual practices: to 're-engineer' people in its image'.

In discourse terms, this process can be seen as a one of 'colonisation' (Fairclough 1989, 1995), the replacing of apparently outmoded traditional values and beliefs with new ones based on the market, on competition. But while senior and middle managers are in accord with these changes, it is likely that the majority of TAFE teachers operate from within different discourses and thus share different social identities. Chappell (1998), for example, has indicated that the talk of many teachers relates largely to student access, equity, individual need and personal development, based on a post-Kangan emphasis on liberal education values, and this is in sharp contrast to management's commercial world talk. More recently, Chappell and Johnston (2003) indicate the tensions for public sector VET practitioners with strong educational identities (e.g. TAFE teachers) in confronting the 'businessing' of VET. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) similarly indicate strong negative feelings on the part of these practitioners.

Discourse 'brokers' at the management/teaching interface

TAFE head teachers may occupy an uneasy role within these changes. On the one hand they are themselves managers, or more accurately, 'front-line' managers (NCVER 2004, Rice forthcoming), but on the other hand, they are also teachers, practitioners occupying an important role 'at the coalface'. And their direct supervision of so many full time and part time teachers places them in a strategic position at the management/teaching interface. If the whole of TAFE is to embrace the new organisational changes favoured by management, then head teachers are key people to be won over. The situation is reminiscent of another workplace context in which Virgona (1994:133) describes shop stewards at the manager/worker interface being assimilated (colonised) within the cultural boundaries of management. Similarly, TAFE head teachers may feel they are

being assimilated within the new managerialism, but it is clear that if they actively resist this process the road to organisational change for TAFE could be considerably slower.

Leontios *et al.* (2004) in a recent research study of 'communities of practice' in TAFE indicates that in one trade section the head teacher was seen as the key person who kept abreast of changes, not the teachers, and thus the head teacher became a 'filter' for what teachers needed to know, and in a sense assumed a 'protector' role. I prefer to use the word 'broker' in this paper, the broker between different and often competing discourses representing those of management and teachers. We already know that head teachers are experiencing tensions in meeting managerial expectations (Rice 2003, 2004). Further, TAFE teachers generally, after a decade or more of the 'new vocationalism', involving competency standards, recognition of prior learning, the Australian Qualifications Framework, training packages and much more, may not be very receptive to many of the organisational changes proposed from within the new managerial discourse (see Harris and Simons 2003, Harris, Simons and Clayton 2005).

In light of these factors, the main aim of this study is to explore the attitudes of a range of TAFE head teachers to the new managerialism. It asks the broader research questions:

- How do head teachers respond to the new managerial discourse? What are their attitudes towards this discourse?
- And related to the above question, are they largely accommodating, or do they resist the discourse, and if so, how?
- And finally, what are the implications of these head teacher responses and attitudes for organisational change in TAFE?

Research method

This is a small-scale research study of head teachers undertaken in one TAFE NSW institute. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eighteen head teachers (eleven male, seven female) during 2004. In the interests of trust, confidentiality and frankness, the interviews were not tape recorded, but notes were taken and later transcribed. As a head teacher myself, I was an 'insider' to the cultural understandings of head teachers, and from the beginning I located my 'self' in the research process (Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997:216-218). In Geertz's (1983:57-58) terms, conceptually the research was 'experience-near'.

The head teachers selected for interviews represented the broad spectrum of TAFE educational disciplines, including sections from the traditional trades, community services and health, various business-related sections including information technology, and general education areas. Within the scope of this small-scale study it was not feasible to focus on an extensive range of elements within the new managerial discourse, and further, the research questions did not set out to explore the full range of tensions confronting head teachers, such as work overload and 'administrivia' (see Rice 2003,

2004), though inevitably some of these tensions were raised in the interviews. Instead, the interviews focused on selected aspects of the new managerial discourse that head teachers were very familiar with and which confronted them regularly in their work. The key areas of focus were:

- *Entrepreneurialism* e.g. Have you developed commercial courses in your section? What are your views on the push for commercial/fee-for-service courses in TAFE?
- *Professional development programs for head teachers* e.g. Have you attended any/many of these programs? What did you learn from them? What did you think of them?
- *The new language of VET*, and in particular the term ‘customer’ e.g. What do you think of the term ‘customer’? Is it appropriate? Do you use the term? What are the alternatives?
- *Views on management (and teaching)* e.g. Would you like to become a manager in TAFE? And if not, why not? What drives/motivates you in your work?

Clearly, the personal views of eighteen head teachers are unlikely to be representative of head teachers generally in TAFE, but through highlighting the range of views and attitudes canvassed in one institute, the intention is to gain some useful insights into how some head teachers respond to the new managerialism and to indicate some trends and areas requiring further study.

Findings and discussion

Entrepreneurialism – developing commercial courses

Entrepreneurialism is one of the centrepieces of the managerial discourse – the idea that TAFE personnel should be actively seeking commercial opportunities as an essential part of their role in keeping TAFE competitive (NCVER 2004). And according to the head teachers interviewed this aspect of the discourse has been largely accepted as one of the new realities of being a head teacher. Some typical comments included:

‘it’s just another class’

‘if we don’t want to be part of it, don’t be a head teacher’

‘you have to adapt to survive’

One respondent in a business-related section felt so strongly about the realities of commercial activities, he stated: ‘I would like to see it as part of my remuneration package’. There were of course detractors also, and especially from head teachers in areas where commercial courses appeared less relevant and viable, such as in some of the general education sections. Perhaps it should be of little surprise that some of these sections are in decline in TAFE with falling enrolments and the risk of losing their head teachers, and a degree of resentment was expressed at commercial courses being

developed at the expense of mainstream programs. One respondent described the situation as 'an apartheid system'.

For almost half of the head teachers the decision to go commercial appeared to be largely a pragmatic one. As core state funded hours decreased with budget cuts, the only way to maintain the hours and thus the viability of a section was to seek commercial courses.

But ideology did appear to play a role for one head teacher in charge of a section in which a former mainstream/core program providing professional qualifications (in a community services area) was now being offered commercially. According to the head teacher this course should be government funded, especially as the new commercial course had few takers. She indicated her belief that 'public good' should outweigh commercial opportunism.

For other head teachers the issues involving commercial courses seemed to be more about procedures and incentives than ideology. They indicated it was so difficult trying to overcome the bureaucracy of TAFE and often involved disputes over costings, and then the section received little for its efforts from commercial courses. They claimed there was no incentive for head teachers. Two head teachers refused to even consider commercial activities because they had no time due to their administrative work overload, a factor according to Rice (2004) which restrains educational leadership among head teachers.

Attitudes to professional development programs

For several years now quite extensive resources at the TAFE institute level have been spent on the professional development of managers and head teachers in particular. The aim clearly has been to target head teachers for change, and they have been offered a wide array of programs, including sessions on the need for change, the financial operations of the institute, and various programs on leadership styles.

Just how successful these programs have been in changing head teachers is unclear. Most of the head teachers interviewed had some negative responses to the professional development program overall, and for some sessions there were strong negative responses including the following: 'it's all crap'; 'learnt nothing'; 'an abuse of resources'; 'waste of time'; 'we were treated like idiots'. Several respondents indicated they were so busy with administration in their section they had no time to consider professional development programs. Another said she couldn't get away due to the lack of replacement teachers.

One of the main objections to the professional development programs was the 'over the top' emphasis on business and marketing related aspects at the expense of the classroom and pedagogy. They claimed few activities seemed to relate to teaching anymore. One head teacher said the sessions were too long and could be collapsed into one half-day activity.

There was certainly awareness that the aim was to change them. One head teacher stated in relation to one particular program: 'It's fun - sometimes I think I'm being brainwashed

– but that’s fine provided I know’. At the very least there was an awareness that this was a new model of professional development (see Mulcahy (2001) in which managers were required to take more responsibility for their own development: ‘They want us to discuss problems and then come up with solutions, to resolve it ourselves. All the time, it’s *you* develop ...’

Finally, a couple of head teachers questioned the need to change at all, stating: ‘People will change when they see a need to change’ and ‘Do we benefit from change? Why change?’

‘Customer satisfaction’: Responses to the new language of VET

Language is never neutral, it is always political (see Fairclough 1989, Gee and Lankshear 1995, Lemke 1995), and it is likely many head teachers instinctively knew that their overnight rebirth as ‘team leaders’ and their new focus on ‘customers’ reflected ideology. The word customers is focused on here because it is significant, indicating that important shift in TAFE from ‘education’ to ‘service’, and because the word has caused resentment and suspicion among TAFE teachers. In one sense ‘customers’ was seen to debase the work of TAFE teachers and was seen as further proof of the de-professionalisation of their work (see Harris, Simons and Clayton 2005: 20-21). As one head teacher stated cynically: ‘Why stop at customers? Why not call them shoppers? – shopping around for courses, and we might then become ‘shop assistants’.’

For other head teachers the word ‘customers’ did not reflect the established relationship between teachers and students, and instead it implied the notion of rights, as in ‘the customer is always right’. But in education this is unlikely to be the case. One head teacher recounted a student recently who refused to accept that she had failed a course. She insisted on her rights as a customer and not as a student respecting the professional judgment of her performance. The issue is one of professional standards. ‘Customers’, seeking value for money, are more assertive and believe they have the right to complain if they are unhappy (see Harris, Simons and Clayton 2005: 67). However, one head teacher demonstrated how difficult it is to always take seriously what ‘customers’ want. A ‘customer satisfaction survey’ of his section revealed complaints that ‘there are not enough sheilas in the course’ (a traditional trade course), and that ‘the pub is too far from the TAFE college’. Another head teacher claimed that the health industry had tried customers, but that it didn’t work, and they were now back to clients and patients.

Virtually all of the head teachers agreed that their focus has been and always will be ‘students’. Though for some of these teachers use of the word ‘customer’ was seen to be a matter of ‘just words’, or in the case of another head teacher, it was a matter of being pragmatic:

‘The term customer, initially I resisted it, but now I’ve been brainwashed. It’s the same with ‘clients’ and ‘jobseekers’. To me they’re just students but I’m prepared to use the right jargon with the right people.’

But there are implications; the language appears confusing, and some head teachers aren't sure where they stand. One head teacher recounted going recently for an interview for a head teacher position and he used the word 'customer' throughout. He didn't get the job, and then in his post-interview counselling he was told his language (using 'customers') was inappropriate: 'The word 'customer', I've taken it right out of my CV now'.

But while the word 'customers' caused concerns there were other 'managerial' words that provided less resistance, such as 'teams'. Even though the term invokes a competitive element, most head teachers said basically that they accepted it because they had always regarded themselves as working cooperatively in a team. But rarely did they refer to their own sections as teams.

The list of managerial vocabulary with a new infused ideological basis is lengthy and changing all the time. As one head teacher pointed out, even middle managers with curriculum and disciplinary field responsibilities are now covered by the term 'business line'.

Teaching: A discourse with passion

A considerable number of senior and middle managers in TAFE are themselves former teachers (Harris, Simons and Clayton 2005: 41), though not always from TAFE. But in the words of one respondent, when teachers become managers, symbolically, they go through those glass doors 'and forget who they were'.

Significantly, the question 'Would you like to become a manager in TAFE?' was responded to with a near unanimous 'No'. This is significant because it could indicate the career trajectory of many head teachers in TAFE effectively ends when they become head teachers, and yet promotion to the ranks of an institute manager would seem to be the most obvious next career step. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005: 29) similarly concluded from their recent study of VET practitioners that the career pathway from teaching to management is not well supported. These findings are important as possible indicators of head teacher resistance to the 'ways of being' that constitute the role of managers. Only three head teachers said they were interested in becoming managers, one because he thought the work would be less stressful, and the other two because they wanted to boost their superannuation payouts just prior to retirement.

The reasons given for shunning management positions were varied. In one sense they probably reflected the aging of the TAFE workforce, with many of the head teachers being in their 50s and perhaps feeling they had gone as far as they were likely to go.

But ideology certainly played a role also, and to understand this we need to understand something about the attitudes and beliefs of head teachers regarding their own jobs. Each head teacher was asked 'What drives you? What motivates you?' And in nearly every case the answer was linked in some way with pedagogy and the related satisfaction of students and staff. Typical responses included:

- so that my section works
- to see people work together, to see students get jobs, they all get jobs in IT
- happy students
- teaching, I get most joy and happiness. Keeping things going smoothly
- to maintain a section with reasonable hours, happy staff and dealing with students and teaching
- I'm passionate about teaching
- to keep staff happy in a reasonable work environment, and students, regardless of all the bullshit, at the end of the day, to help them with maturity and enable them to be better people

Their love of teaching and all things related partly explains the reason why so few head teachers would consider promotion to management, (a finding consistent with those of a UK study of practitioners' perceptions of management, see Fletcher-Campbell 2003). Managers were seen to be divorced from pedagogy, and not just the practice of teaching. One head teacher said 'they're not interested in curriculum areas', and another claimed 'they have no educational role'. Several head teachers suggested managers 'should be forced to spend some time with a class to enable them to connect with the real world of head teachers.'

Perspectives on management overall were not favourable. One head teacher said he felt isolated because he knew his line manager represented different interests and thus would not necessarily support him. Another claimed 'we fight for educational issues and are prepared to take industrial action, they (management) don't'. One head teacher suggested the role of the middle manager was the worst because they were the 'meat in the sandwich'. The institute directors and senior managers simply 'pass their dictates down the line' and middle managers have little or no autonomy. Similarly, another head teacher made reference to middle management bearing the 'brunt of all top level bullshit'.

Finally, though, for several head teachers the decision to shun management positions was simply the stresses associated with the job that they could do without - 'too much go, go'.

Conclusions

It is difficult to draw firm conclusions in answering the first research question relating to how head teachers respond to the new managerial discourse. Many of these head teachers have quite different backgrounds which may well reflect different professional identities and thus different responses (see Clow 2001 for a UK comparison). Chappell (1998) has already distinguished between those whose identities are based on traditional vocational (i.e. trades) discourses, and those based on liberal education discourses. And when you add teachers drawn from business and private industry, it is clear there will be diverse beliefs and values, and the interview data indicated that both ends of the political spectrum are accounted for. For example, one respondent commented: 'The new culture is great – I fully support the Institute Director'. But at the other extreme, one head teacher stated he 'hated the position' (of manager), though he added that he personally liked the bloke in the position.

The issue of ‘balance’ was mentioned by several head teachers, balance in terms of where to draw the line between the elements of the new managerial discourse they were prepared to accept and those they were not prepared to accept (see also Rice 2004:10). Several head teachers accepted what they saw as the inevitable, evolving role of TAFE: ‘like the Unis, from technical to marketable commodities’. To a large extent the point of balance appeared to relate not to ideological objections to the new managerial discourse but to being overworked; some felt they were so bound up with administration, they couldn’t face having to deal with anything new. In this respect, several head teachers mentioned a heavy focus on ASH (Annual Student Hours) and CLAMS (a computer-based roll). And the result was, they resisted the new managerial discourse.

Thus, the second research question about the relative head teacher accommodation or resistance to the new managerial discourse is also inconclusive. Resistance was largely hidden, or at least private. One head teacher for example, said he simply deleted every email to do with professional development and organisational change. And he was also ready to leave section head meetings by the back door whenever he had the opportunity.

Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005: 70) argue that negative feelings on the part of VET practitioners (especially public) may be ‘transformed into resistance’. The evidence from this current study indicates that various forms of resistance to the new managerial discourse were a feature of head teacher attitudes (as with many organisations, see Jermier *et al.* 1994). In this TAFE organisational context the situation would appear to fit what Anyon (1983) has termed ‘resistance within accommodation’, that is, private resistance within public accommodation. Few head teachers, for example, were prepared to voice their resistance openly in public forums, such as in section head meetings. In some of the interviews head teachers revealed that part of their public accommodation was based on fear of retribution (a common feature in other work contexts – see Collinson 1994). If they became known as resisters they felt there was always the possibility of their section and possibly their careers suffering in some way (e.g. from budget cuts). And there was evidence from parts of the general education areas of how failure (or inability) to take on the new managerial discourse in relation to entrepreneurialism contributed to the loss of teaching hours. As one of these head teachers stated: ‘we’re dead already’, with hours falling below the point of qualifying for a head teacher position.

In addressing the third research question regarding the implications for TAFE of the attitudes of these head teachers to the new managerial discourse, it is significant to mention that several head teachers firmly believed their role did have strategic importance in TAFE. One head teacher stated that without them ‘the agenda just wouldn’t operate’. They were the ones who kept the system going. Regardless of all the problems facing TAFE in recent years, ‘we’ve made it work’. One head teacher expressed his role thus: ‘The head teacher is the key person. Teachers say I won’t do this for TAFE but I’ll do it for you – their allegiance is to the head teacher not TAFE’. This key role for head teachers underpins the rationale for this study, with the notion that the extent of organisational change across the whole of TAFE, and in particular, acceptance

of the new managerialism is largely dependent on how head teachers respond. Or in more recent poststructural terms, it is the extent to which head teachers have or have not changed their identities and become 'different kinds of people' in line with the new managerial discourse (Gee, Hull and Lankshear 1996:10).

My argument is that head teachers have a brokerage role given their location at the intersection of the two main discourses representing management and teachers. To date, the new managerial discourse has been imposed on head teachers, and as we have seen, the degree of accommodation varies, and clearly many head teachers resist, some strongly, depending on the issue. This picture of organisational change and the existence of two seemingly distinct discourse communities within TAFE – comprising management and teachers, may appear overly reductionist. But for the head teachers interviewed in this study the differences were real, and it was for them, as 'brokers', to decide where they stood in relation to these discourses.

What the interview data make clear is that these head teachers are grappling with the changes that are affecting VET providers everywhere, but especially TAFE, in the broad shift from 'education and training' to 'business and service' (NCVER 2004). The dissenting voices of head teachers on aspects of the new managerialism expressed in this study would indicate that this shift may be far from complete.

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