

# THE silent teacher: spoken and unspoken rhetorics and the politics of training reform

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## Abstract

One of the precepts of Game Theory states that whoever starts the game is more likely to win. This paper explores the game of training reform and particularly its impact on teachers who certainly do not make the rules. It traces the impact of the Training Reform Agenda from 1990 to its echoes of Victorian Minister Kosky's 2002 statement *Knowledge and Skills for the Innovation Economy*. The study considers the effects of these reform rhetorics on curriculum and teachers' work. It considers who speaks and who must remain silent when curriculum decisions are made.

The author focuses particularly on education and training in jewellery design and other arts education as she explores what is spoken and what is unspoken in the politics of training reform. Reference to learning that is, or should be, rich in thinking and creativity leads to a critique of many of the assumptions underpinning Training Packages and to Ross's concept of artistic 'mental slavery'.

The author goes on to consider the application of some novel theories and novel solutions to the analysis of Training Reform, Game Theory in particular. She refers to Akerlof, Spence and Stiglitz' work on 'information economics' where the "players have different information and are privileged with different, unequal knowledge about the object of a game". This analysis throws new light on the question of who can speak and who must remain silent during Training Reform events such as the development of a Training Package.

## Introduction

CBT was embraced as central to the Training Reform Agenda in 1990 and was introduced widely in VET systems in Australia as a means of constructing the "clever country", improving skill levels and work productivity in an increasingly competitive global market (Cornford, p.2). At the 1996 VICAD Second National Conference, "First Class-World: Training in Australia", sponsored by the Victorian Association of Directors of TAFE Institutes, Robert Jones, the President, CEO of the National Alliance of Business (USA) was the keynote speaker.

Jones espoused the rhetoric still so prevalent in the literature relating to training and education reform. In his speech entitled "The challenge of world-class training: the changing world economy", Jones said, "The time has passed to view what you do, provide education and training, as a social program. It is not. Now it is real world economics...the pressures for needed changes in our systems is driven by the unprecedented challenges faced by business"(p.2).

Education Minister Lynne Kosky echoes Jones sentiments in her forward to the 2002 policy document on the future directions for the Victorian vocational education and training system entitled "Knowledge and Skills for the Innovation Economy".

Published six years after Jones speech, Kosky says, “Victoria needs a training system that is responsive to the needs of existing and emerging industries ... Reform of the training sector is about ensuring that Victoria is ready and prepared, and has the skills that are needed in the future, to enable our industries to compete internationally”.

Jones states “the future success of all training programs will be the formation of vital partnerships with industrial sectors and the businesses within them ... Business must “own” the curriculum, authenticate the equipment, technology and software, set the standards and assessments and authorise the credentials. Students need to know the school they are attending is recognized by industry, teachers need to know what to teach and government needs to be sure that its funding is for employer recognized standards”(p.8).

This paper will discuss some of the issues that have emerged from the Training Reform agenda for teachers and learners in the arts and the community. . The discussion will encompass issues for learners, teachers, industry and the community.

### **Research method**

The study is based on a small qualitative study. The work was completed as part of a Master of Education program at Monash University. One case study - a long interview with teacher “M”, a visual arts and entertainment teacher and from relevant literature. The author reflected on these sources in the context of her personal experience as a jewellery and metalsmithing design teacher in a large TAFE institute.

### **Findings and discussion**

#### *Issues for learners*

As Cornford points out, one of the assumptions underpinning CBT is that standards can be established through analysis of work carried out in business and industry and that there will be agreement about these standards (p.8). From my own observation of the Jewellery industry, (part of the Metals and Engineering sector) it seems that there are clear difficulties in the implementation of consistent skills in an industry that that is very diverse. For instance, there are many businesses that are highly specialized in one particular area of production such as gem setting, chain making or casting. Within specialized jewellery businesses, the work is often divided into even more specialized tasks. One person at a casting facility will spend the day cutting rubber moulds, another at the wax-injecting machine and yet another will polish castings. Those training in such diverse workplaces will all be awarded their Certificate III in Engineering Technology (Jewellery). Training Package customisation also allows an employer to select a limited range of modules that suit their workplace. However the title of the qualification suggests a broader set of skills. Therefore it is evident that the notion of consistent and portable skills is problematic. In some instances, the credential has little meaning and the trainee has very limited employment opportunity, counteracting the benefits of portability and consistency from the employee’s point of view.

The experienced teacher who I interviewed (“M”), highlighted another dilemma that has arisen in relation to TP’s and CBT that has implications for employers, employees and students. “M” believes that there is an overemphasis on skills development in the TP and laments the disappearance of certain aspects of study that had been taught prior to the introduction of TP’s in the entertainment industry such as history and theory of film, television and mass communication. These units were designed to help develop the ability to critically analyse the fundamental workings of the media. Herein lies one of the more questionable aspects of TP’s, the interpretation of “skills” as manual, not mental. A cynic might conclude that employers and big business don’t really want questioning, critical or thinking employees and that a compliant workforce is far more preferable to them.

The failure to recognise “thinking” skills as valuable also has implications from governments’ perspective since it contradicts the rhetoric, the ideological driver to develop the “clever country”. Lynne Kosky’s Ministerial statement, however, refers to the “innovation economy”, marking a shift in focus from the “knowledge economy”. She states “The economic – and indeed social success of individuals, regions, states and nations is coming to depend on the quality of their human resources: what people know and can do, their creativity, their ability to adjust to change, and to innovate”(p.1). Perhaps the mechanisms for delivering us all to an economic ‘nirvana’ - CBT and TP’s - will soon be adjusted to incorporate the power of the brain. After all, that is what the knowledge/ innovation economy is supposed to be about. So Jones notion of business “owning” the curriculum is problematic. Clearly input from industry is valuable and necessary but the idea of ownership suggests exclusion of other vital concerns particularly those relating to the student/trainee and to the teacher.

The impacts of business ownership of curriculum on students can be further illustrated with the following example. One of the most common criticisms of the old Apprenticeship system in the area of jewellery manufacture was that it was a curriculum that was designed to prepare young people only for employment. The Apprenticeship was a largely (manual) skills based form of training lacking units that might empower graduands to develop independent businesses such as design, the study of new technologies, product development, business practice and industry awareness. After all, the last thing that employers wanted was competition.

Some of the students in the Advanced Diploma course had completed their Apprenticeship. They wanted to be able to design their own pieces in order to establish a point of difference with their competition but had not learned how to do so in their Apprenticeship. Surely young people should have the right to receive an education that is going to be empowering to them in terms of their own career development as well as to be of benefit to employers.

This is a particularly important consideration in the so-called post-industrial, knowledge economy - a climate of constant change and one where workers are increasingly expected to take responsibility for navigating the rather bumpy landscape of their own careers. Jones himself predicts that the roles of individuals will shift. “Rather than being dependant on a range of institutions and implicit guarantees for their economic security and career, individuals will have more responsibility for making decisions that will ensure their continued ‘employability’ in the labour

market” (p.11). So Jones contention that education and training ought not be viewed as a “social program” (noted earlier) certainly raises some problematic issues.

### Issues for teachers

I would now like to consider the impacts of exclusion of teachers from the “ownership” of the curriculum. When Jones states, “teachers need to know what to teach”, there is an implication that they are empty vessels. Yet TAFE art and design teachers have considerable experience and qualifications in their particular fields. Such backgrounds are essential in order to gain employment in a TAFE institute as these teaching positions are highly sought.

To illustrate the dilemma that I have related to the devaluing of the teaching profession in TAFE, I will recount my experience. In the process of developing the Advanced Diploma of Engineering Technology-Jewellery Design and Metalsmithing (ADET-JDM) in 1994-5, I discovered that a teacher’s voice was not considered to be of value to at any point apart from curriculum writing. Teachers were excluded from meetings and from membership on Advisory Committees that determined what curriculum development would be supported at the state government level and the form that the curriculum took. Teachers were excluded from providing any other kind of input. I was told that curriculum had to be driven by industry, not teachers. I was also told by a member of what was then the State Training Board (now OTFE) that if I chose to attend a certain industry advisory workshop, I must not speak.

Yet my background encompassed some seven years of tertiary education, twelve years of industrial experience that included working in the commercial jewellery trade, exhibiting extensively, developing product ranges across a range of design fields, running my own business and working for twelve years as a TAFE teacher. After graduating from the RMIT course in Art and Design – Gold and Silversmithing (as their top graduate), I found that I did not have the skills to make a living from my practice so I felt the need to work in the jewellery trade where I could develop skills, speed, efficiency, extend my network of contacts and learn more about the industry in a broad sense. It was during this period of employment that I became aware of a significant training gap between apprenticeships (that trained people to work in the commercial jewellery trade, otherwise known as “east”) and art based education that prepared people for a design and/or exhibition-based practice (otherwise known as “west”). I had observed and experienced the great qualities as well as the complaints of both systems. All of these experiences prepared me very well for involvement in the curriculum development process. Or so I thought...

The omission of teachers and other vocational education experts from the consultation process is recognised by Cornford as a serious “miscalculation” (p.3). He points out that it is teachers who implement such initiatives and are best able to make pragmatic judgements about the practical issues that are involved. Cornford further states that even the House of Representatives Standing Committee for Long Term Strategies (an inquiry into the workforce of the future and Chaired by Barry Jones, 1995) accepted that the decision to adopt and implement CBT involving political leaders, business leaders and the trade union movement with little consultation with teachers was a mistake (p.3).

Employers, too, were dissatisfied with the Apprenticeship system of training for jewellers but had no idea of how to change it or developing alternatives. And for all the rhetoric about the need for industry to be heavily involved in the development of training, quite frankly, many industry members did not see it as their role. I don't know whether this has changed eight years down the track since the development of the ADET-JDM but at that time and in the jewellery industry, there was very much the feeling that developing courses of training and education fell in the domain of the education sector. So much for Jones concept of industry ownership.

To get a new course of training off the ground, I knew that the idea needed to be seen to come from industry. So, I raised the idea of developing a kind of 'east meets west' course combining technical, design and business skills at relevant industry conferences and with industry members. Letters of support from key industry representatives were secured and an industry survey was conducted. I produced a 300-page curriculum document written with the appropriate 'curriculum-speak' of the day (on top of my full-time teaching load). As you can imagine this was an exhaustive and exhausting process but it didn't come from me, did it! I gained enormous satisfaction from developing the curriculum but that doesn't negate the demoralising experience of the process of exclusion, of realising that the profession that I was so passionate about was so devalued and of the political desire to silence teachers.

Pat Forward, the Federal TAFE Secretary of the Australian Education Union (AEU), comments that it is outrageous that there is no teacher-unionist on the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) Board and that the AEU has to struggle to be heard within the state bureaucracies. She also believes that the Training Reform Agenda would have been different if the voices of teachers had been heard"(2004, p.17).

Forward states that the questions that need to be addressed revolve around the professionalism and identity of TAFE teachers and their role in the contemporary TAFE environment. She asks, "Are TAFE teachers primarily trainers and assessors, or industry experts? Or are they teachers, whose first claim to a professional identity lies with their skill as educators rather than as industry experts? " (p.16). From these questions stems a raft of further issues such as employment modes, casualisation, workload, working conditions, qualifications and professional development.

### Issues for the community

Jones suggests that knowledge will be the main source of economic growth and that more education and skills for people translates into higher earnings, improved employment prospects, more stable employment, improved benefits and improvements in the quality of life (p.6-7). Kosky's statements echo those of Jones when she states that the government's "key goal is leading the way with education and lifelong learning as the key. Education opens the doors to high-quality jobs, to a full and creative life ... and to a high-wage economy" (p.1).

These ideas are seductive. As Seddon points out, there is the suggestion of "movement from control to autonomy, from routine to creativity, from constraint to opportunity and from subjection to agency and voice ... that resonates with diverse

groups, in and beyond education ... The emphasis on learning, in particular, appeals to a deep sense of freedom rather than necessity. Yet, in the hands of contemporary policy-makers, these terms take on new meanings that reflect the policy concerns and priorities of powerful agencies, including governments of the day” (2004, p.4). Seddon details research that reflects broad-ranging community disenchantment with the economic reforms of the past 20 years (p.13).

In his article, “*Techno-Sweatshops (the future of labor)*”, Andrew Ross suggests that the New Economy “does not make it any easier to distinguish between manual and mental slavery”(p.1). Ross argues that new kinds of mental labour are rapidly becoming industrialized and questions the notion of “post-industrialization”. He describes

*“the funky milieu of the Webshops, where over half the jobs are filled by contract employees or perma-temps, where workers rarely find employer-supported health care and where deeply caffeinated eighty-five hour workweeks without overtime are a way of life for employees on flexible contracts, who invest a massive share of “sweat equity” in the mostly futile hope that their stock options will pay off” (p.2).*

At this workplace, as hip and alternative as it may appear, “employees become so complicit with the culture of overwork and burnout that they have developed their own insider brand of sick humour about being “net slaves”, inferring that it’s actually cool to be exploited so badly” (p.2).

Ross argues that “*artists’ traditions of sacrifice, whereby the cash compensation for doing creative work is deeply discounted, are feeding directly into new economic sectors like the Webshops ... We have seen the academy succumb to the rapid penetration of the low-wage economy, with much of its contingent workforce teaching for wages at or near the poverty line ... hastened by academic traditions of sacrificial labour, which sanction the voluntary acceptance of discounted wages for the privilege of doing mental work” (p.2)*

Ross contends that overwork and underpayment do not disappear when knowledge rather than heavy manufacture drives the economy. He foresees a future where mental labour becomes the “high octane fuel” for a low wage industrial revolution unless we can learn to price and value our work.

Ira Shor asserts that in the USA education spending has been diverted to fund the computerisation of educational institutions and new technologies away from other areas. This has resulted in deteriorating facilities, poor maintenance, inadequate resources, low salaries, large class sizes, reduction of electives, an overemphasis on vocational training and new curricula that discourages creativity and liberal education (1986, p.409). This situation sounds startlingly similar to the Australian experience in education since the nineties.

My interview with teacher “M”, revealed his concern that Training Packages have actually devalued the high level of skill that is attained with experience in some fields. For instance, the highest qualification available in Lighting and Sound Technology is only at Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Certificate IV level. Salaries are pegged to AQF levels. This failure to recognise and acknowledge skill levels

contradicts one of the ideological premises that propelled us toward the development of TP's – "skilling up the nation" and paying workers accordingly. Without financial rewards, there is little incentive for workers to continue to improve skill levels, to embrace the concept of life-long learning or to be innovative in the workplace.

Cornford contends that evidence of the political, ideological nature of the decision to implement CBT can be identified through the absence of research funded by the ANTA and the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) particularly in relation to whether skill levels increase as a result of CBT (p.3). Cornford further states that there has been little effort made to consult with teachers in this regard (p.4). However, his own research revealed some startling findings that 63.9% of experienced teachers considered that the introduction of CBT had hindered students' attainment of skilled performance levels with a further 25% considering that skill levels had not changed (p.5). The Training Reform Agenda was, after all, based on achieving effective performance. Cornford accuses the Federal Government and ANTA of failing to acknowledge that "the paradigm being espoused was an entirely theoretic one" (p.3). There appear to be real issues here related to the way that public funding is used to support a system that was not based on sound research and may well not be effective.

Cornford also argues that because Australia's relative international competitiveness actually declined during the years 1994-97, the stated aims of CBT have not been achieved therefore there is urgent need for re-assessment of underpinning policies (p.1). Cornford says that ANTA has failed to disclose financial data on the investments in CBT. "This is curious in an era of economic rationalism purportedly driven by "hard headed realism and cost benefit analyses" (p.4).

Cornford provides data that suggests that CBT has not been embraced by small business that employs the vast majority of workers (which he defines as having less than 50 employees (p.12). This may have changed since Cornford's research was conducted, however the implication is that CBT and TP'S tend only to benefit big business. The cost of training reform has alarming implications for the community if it has failed to deliver either economic benefits or improved skill levels for the majority of Australians.

There is an increasing amount of literature relating to the development of coping strategies for workplace change. The Safety Director's Report published by the Institute of Management & Administration (USA) in their newsletter (December, 2002) advises health and safety professionals to "prepare for a revolution" (p.1). The report says that the evolution of the nature of work will alter the injury and illness landscape due to the aging workforce, the use of short term contracts and temporary employees, accelerating technological development and the increased levels of "teleworking" – where employees work from a number of locations.

The report suggests that the wider use of contract and sessional staff rotating through a workplace will mean that organizations will be less able to transfer safety lessons to workers who are apt to have less experience and there will be a gradual loss of institutional knowledge (p.2). The report warns, "without an investment in workers' lifelong training by all companies, a healthy workforce will be impossible to

maintain” (p.2). Health and safety need to be integrated into organizational change processes. As organisations transform, fewer workers will face the traditional manufacturing risks that have been the focus of workplace OH&S. The new risks are envisaged to relate to ergonomic problems related to information-intensive work, stress from increasing work demands and workplace violence as a result of personal contact with others (p.2-3). As I sit at my computer, rubbing my back and ever mindful of the time, I see and feel the dilemma.

Strategic thinker Chin-Ning Chu asserts that the worker in today’s economic-industrial landscape who is smart will be more dangerous, use more strategy and be more manipulative in order to foster employability. This is also what I observe increasingly among sessional teaching staff who are, understandably, quite desperate for more work and more stable working conditions. In her book, *“Thick Face, Black Heart: The Path to Thriving, Winning and Succeeding in Everyday Life and Work Using the Ancient Wisdom of the East”*, Chu advocates the Hindu-Buddhist concept of *dharma* as a method to inspire people to do the right things according to the situation, to use personal integrity and spirituality as tools for career development (Allerton, 1998, p.2).

It may be possible to apply Game Theory to the fields of education and industrial relations in terms of the relationships between policy makers, senior managers, teachers and unions. One of the precepts of Game Theory is that whoever starts the game is more likely to win. This seems to help explain the vigorous pursuit of the knowledge economy, and all that it entails in terms of internationalisation, information technologies, computerisation, restructuring and concepts of ‘life long learning’.

Considering the global developments discussed in this paper, I would suggest that it is no accident of history that John Nash was awarded the 1994 Nobel Memorial Prize for his work that developed novel mathematical techniques that systematized aspects of strategy into a science. Game Theory studies interactive decision-making, where the outcome for each participant or ‘player’ depends on the actions of all. The choices of other game players must be considered when choosing one’s strategy. This science is unusual in that its precepts are applicable to a broad range of activities from politics, diplomacy and military strategy to law, economics, business, biology, sport and everyday social interactions (Dixit, 2002, p.1).

Other scientists have worked on the theory, particularly in the 1990’s. The 2001 Nobel Memorial Prize was awarded to Akerlof, Spence and Stiglitz for their work in the field of ‘information economics’ where the ‘players’ have different information and are privileged with different, unequal knowledge about the object of a game (Dixit, pp.6-7). In this ‘game’, actions that reveal or conceal information play crucial roles. Dixit argues that the parallel development of concepts and techniques in Game Theory have enabled information economics to burgeon in the last twenty years (p.4). It seems that in an historical period that is so pronounced by economic change, parallel theories and strategies for dealing with it are developed and, indeed, championed.

## **Conclusion**

Game Theory could be applied to help teachers and other workers to find and develop better strategies and counterstrategies to curb the trajectories that have propelled us all down this perplexing path. Further analysis of this possibility is enticing but beyond the scope of this paper. I am simply suggesting that the current and emerging challenges that we must face as individuals and groups at this point in time in history require some strategic and perhaps novel approaches that are built into the education and training process.

At the beginning of this paper I quoted from Minister Kosky's policy document that voiced the objectives of training and education reform. I have researched and illustrated a number of issues and dilemmas that exist between the rhetoric expressed in that document and the reality of the instruments of that reform, CBT and TP's. There appears to be good reason for the history of complaint that has surrounded these reforms. Had teachers been consulted about training reform, problematic issues may have been significantly reduced.

The politics that have shaped VET over the past 15 years have largely been driven by business needs resulting from rapid developments in information and other technologies combined with shifts toward global economies. These changes have been so rapid that governments are also struggling to react to them. The desire to be first in the technological game of the new millennium appears to have propelled governments toward an over zealous and pre-emptive implementation of policies without regard for proper processes of research, consultation and evaluation.

The silences surrounding the financing and effectiveness of training reform are, themselves, an indication of need for immediate research that addresses these key areas. Has reform of the training sector made Victoria and Victorians more 'ready and prepared' to compete globally than we were 15 years ago? Do we, as workers, have the skills that are needed in the future? Are we now more able to cope with future changes related to work?

If training reforms prepare some people to some extent for employment, there appear to be gaps in training and education for the growing number of people who either choose to be self-employed or find that they must work effectively as entrepreneurs - contractors or consultants with a range of employers in an industrial environment of decreasing full-time work opportunities. So there also seems to be a need to incorporate work/career management, critical thinking, coping skills, self-reliance and stress management into training programs. 'Ownership' of the curriculum needs to be by a broader range of interest groups than it is at present. One thing is certain, the answers to training and education needs of individuals, small and big business require more solutions than the "one size fits all" TP's that exist at the moment in VET.

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