Making Vet Pedagogy Explicit

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Abstract

This paper is part of a larger research and publication project that is taking place in the Pedagogy, Education and Praxis research group in the Research Institute of Professional Practice Learning and Education (RIPPLE). It builds on the theoretical framework that has informed the publication of an international series of books relating to pedagogy and practice. This empirical project will provide insights into VET pedagogy and praxis that will be juxtaposed beside the results of a similar project in Sweden in late 2009.

The major objective of this project will be to develop an overview of VET pedagogy in Australia with particular reference to different contexts and different locations that will inform both policy and practice.

This objective will be achieved by:
- an examination of a range of NCVER publications over the last five years
- interviews with a number of curriculum managers, teachers and materials developers across the VET sector
- engaging in validation exercises with a range of stakeholders.

"'To see what all this really was', she insisted, 'beyond the relics and the old-fashioned horrors and shows-you needed a passion for the everyday'. That was how she put it. 'And for that, mere looking got you nowhere. All you see then', she told him, 'is what catches the eye, the odd thing, the unusual. But to see what is common, that is the difficult thing, don't you think? For that we need imagination, and there is never enough of it- never, never, enough'" (Malouf, 1999).

Introduction

It is easy to lose sight of the 'everyday' work of teachers and trainers in the VET sector. The expansive nature of the Australian Training Reform Agenda, the focus on skill shortages and the links to qualifications, the constancy of Training Package requirements and the compliance requirements of the Quality Training Framework often occupy our time and discussions with important but sometimes 'busy' work. It is however true that none of these initiatives will achieve the desired outcomes if the well articulated and understood pedagogies are not there to support and extend them through sound teaching and informed critique. VET has a long history of pedagogical tradition that extends from the 16th century guilds, through the early adult and community education organizations and the evolution of the apprenticeship model. These traditions have informed teachers' work. If history and tradition are to inform current practice it is important to explore, in explicit ways, the range of current thinking on pedagogy in VET.

It is simultaneously true that the announcements encapsulated in the "New Directions Paper" and the "Skilling Australia" (November 2007) documents highlight the need for a more highly skilled workforce. This is to be achieved in a number of ways: a focus on retention rates in school or VET; the creation of 450,000 new training places; a push towards higher level VET sector qualifications and the Trade Centres in Schools initiative. These policies are directed towards both productivity and the engagement of formerly disengaged groups in the society. There is a new determination to manage transition arrangements between school, the VET sector and work, and a new commitment towards curriculum reform. If these initiatives are to succeed with an enthusiasm equivalent to their formulation then a return to a focus on the pedagogies appropriate and successful in VET is both justified and overdue. New participants, new and higher levels of achievement and the focus on previously disenfranchised groups in the society mean that the rich variety of VET pedagogies need to be made explicit, transferable and discussable to improve the learning outcomes for all students.

The research program being undertaken by Charles Sturt University, Canberra Institute of Technology and VET researchers from the University of Gothenburg is

therefore both timely and relevant. This paper reports on one phase of this program- an investigation of the perceived definitions of pedagogy amongst some research participants and a preliminary extraction of themes from a range of National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) publications.

Theoretical Framework

Teaching in VET entails significant tensions for teachers. These tensions are between the 'characteristically modern forms of impersonal rationality institutionalised by capitalism and by bureaucracy'…(Knight, 1998, p.5.) and the traditions, histories and consequent practices that have guided the choices of most people who teach in vocational education and training. These tensions demand that we encounter significant questions about the effects of policy on practice, and consider wider issues about the moral purposes of education and training.

The European tradition that has informed much VET practice in Australia was based on a craft relationship between a 'master practitioner' and a 'novice'. These individual relationships gradually amalgamated into 'guilds' or groups of masters involved in the same craft. The guilds were the sites at which the *techne* or disposition to make a product and the *poiesis* or making of the product were contextualised by *phronesis* or the commitment to act wisely in your trade and *praxis* or behaving professionally and morally as an integral part of life and work. In the apprenticeship and the guild, we see one form of the nexus of tradition, practices, institutions and the "narrative unity of a human life" described by Macintyre (1984, p. 36). Vocational Education and Training had its own virtues, its own characteristics and its own particular relation to the *techne* (disposition) and *poiesis* (making action) characteristic of the various crafts. It held its own sense of place in the society, and had a set of practices embedded in these histories and traditions. As McIntyre argues in "After Virtue" these traditions and histories connect members to a relationship not just with the current milieu, but with a rich past; "with those who have preceded us in practice, particularly those whose achievements extended the reach of the practice to its present point. (Knight, 1998, p.87) This rich traditional past has provided a context for the organisational structure of present day VET. A structure that has developed a highly regulatory and bureaucratic nature.

The accrediting organizations create complex webs of regulations that 'name' a world of entities (like teacher preparation institutions, teacher education courses, curriculum content, pedagogies, teacher educators, pre-service teachers and graduating teachers) and activities (like teaching and assessing) to be administered. These 'webs form what Kemmis & Grootenboer (2008) call 'practice architectures':

> Organizations, institutions and settings, and the people in them, create *practice architectures*, which prefigure practices, enabling and constraining particular kinds of sayings, doings and relatings among people within them, and in relation to others outside them. The way these practice architectures are constructed shapes practice in its cultural-discursive, social-political and material-economic dimensions, giving substance and form to what is and can be actually said and done, by, with and for whom (p.57).

The philosopher Alasdair Macintyre (1984) maintains that we live in a world where there is so much uncertainty and unpredictability that one of the primary goals of government seems now to be to inculcate a positivist belief in the certainty of control reinforced through bureaucracy and compliance. In the case of teacher accrediting bodies, there is also an implicit message that the work of teachers can be reduced to formulae expressed through competencies and their associated performance criteria. These hard-edged statements of what constitutes a capable and responsive teacher are presented in official discourses that almost defy argument. The result is that

> the canons of bureaucratic authority and those of conventional social scientific methodology are mutually reinforcing. Both mask fundamental conflict; and both are liable to make conflict a more marginal phenomenon than it is, or rather than it would otherwise be. By representing conflict as marginal and manageable by administration, both do indeed make it more manageable (Knight 1998 p 66.)

Pedagogy

The discussions of pedagogy are very blurry at times. Different dimensions of pedagogy are highlighted in different studies. This is particularly evident in the

NCVER reports which form part of the data set for this research program. In some instances, the pedagogical implications are not explored but remain embedded in the work that has been produced. In other instances, the pedagogical implications have no theoretical consistency and are difficult to place beside those arising from other studies. There have been few attempts to draw these pedagogical messages together.

Pedagogy is multidimensional and this partly explains why various parts have been 'snipped off' for study, or embedded in the research studies that have been published. The activity of apprehending the meaning of the term 'pedagogy' is like the Seven Blind Men describing the elephant. Each was accurate in their descriptions of the parts they encountered, but all missed the totality of the animal they confronted.

The theoretical literature on 'pedagogy' is extensive. One of the most distinguished authors in this area is Basil Bernstein who in *'Pedagogy, Symbolic Control and Identity'* (1996) introduces the concept of 'framing' to any analysis of pedagogical practice.

"Framing refers to the nature of the control over:
- The selection of the communication;
- Its sequencing (what comes first, what come second);
- Its pacing (the rate of expected acquisition);
- The criteria; and
- The control over the social base which makes this transmission possible (p27).

Bernstein also introduces the concept of 'classification' into his work on pedagogy. "Classification constructs the nature of social space; stratifications, distributions and locations" (Bernstein, 1996, p.26). "We can distinguish between strong and weak classifications according to the degree of insulation between categories, be these categories of discourse, categories of gender, etc. Thus, in the case of strong classification, each category has its unique identity, its unique voice, its own specialised rules of internal relations. In the case of weak classification, we have less specialised discourses, less specialised identities, less specialised voices. But classifications, whether strong or weak, always carry power relations" (Bernstein, 1996, p.21).

In Vocational Education and Training in Australia, we have evidence of strong 'framing' and 'classification'. The design of Training Packages that focus on the specificity of competencies, and evidence of the demonstration of these through assessment, 'frame' and 'classify' the teaching and learning processes to the apparent exclusion of explicit pedagogy. However, an examination of the research literature over the last five years may show that pedagogy survives into the practice of teaching and learning. This pedagogy is understandably implicit but should not remain so.

For the purposes of this study, 'pedagogy' is defined as a core of effective and traditional practices of teaching and training that have worked over time. Pedagogies are further embedded in programs and practices as assumptions that influence the design and delivery of teaching and training (Brennan, R E, 2001, p.24). This definition rests on the theoretical framework outlined above. This framework has been chosen to apply to the VET sector because "Where framing is strong, we shall have visible pedagogic practice. Here the rules of instructional and regulative discourse are explicit" (Bernstein, B 1996, p.28).

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies are used in this research because the researchers are attempting to find out 'how' and 'why' answers as well as 'what 'answers. (Yin, 1994). Qualitative methodology encourages the emergence of rich detail and narrative suited to the research topic. Perspectives are vitally important in this research area and qualitative methods are particularly suitable in helping to identify and account for the different perspectives (Maxwell, 2002)

A collection of research reports published by NCVER was examined during an intensive literature review and several core studies were identified for in depth analysis.

Pedagogical themes were then extracted and analysed from this primary data. A theoretical framework of praxis and praxis development will then be applied to determine the implicit pedagogical themes that are present.

The table below summarises both the stages and the activities involved in this research program.

Two broad streams

Examine research literature	Consult with stakeholders
• Collect NCVER research reports – VET pedagogy • Examine reports whose key messages have explicit implications for VET pedagogy • Identify pedagogical themes • Application of PEI* to themes • Consultation with authors of key NCVER research literature	• Qualitative interviews &/or focus groups with curriculum managers, teaching co-ordinators, teachers, policy makers at state and federal levels • How do they react to the analysis of the literature / pei's? • What do they consider contributes to excellence in VET pedagogy?

*pedagogical effectiveness indicators

Consultations with the authors of the selected reports will be undertaken to cross check and validate the findings during the next phase of this research.

A list of personnel for the qualitative interviews and focus groups include a range of people from Government (Federal and State), industry and the teaching profession:

- Two Curriculum Managers
- Two Teaching and Learning Coordinators
- Two Teachers
- Two VET University Students
- A range of policy makers

The aim of the qualitative interviews will be to determine how high level stakeholders react to the analysis of the literature and reports. A focus group will be conducted to determine the various views on what the stakeholders consider contribute to excellence in VET pedagogy.

Johnson & Christensen (2008 p 210) assert that focus groups are especially useful as they complement other methods of data collection. They are very useful in providing in-depth information in a relatively short period of time. In addition, the results are usually easy to understand.

Preliminary Research

In order to focus their thinking, the researchers engaged in a preliminary research exercise with a group of participants at the Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) Conference 2008. The issues raised by the ALARA participants will be discussed here in terms of how they relate to the theoretical framework of the research project.

In September 2008 a group of ALARA Conference participants met to discuss what VET pedagogy meant to them (Sutcliffe, 2008). These participants, although all connected through VET, were from a variety of backgrounds including: VET teachers of science, childcare, nursing, design and communication; teachers of VET teachers; curriculum developers; and e-learning specialists. The discussion was wide ranging and many links can be made between the issues the participants raised and the theoretical framework that underpins this research project.

As the participants discussed what VET pedagogy meant to them two broad ideas emerged: education – learning/teaching, thinking, knowledge and processes and business – clients, profits, connections and outcomes. These two broad ideas dominated the content of the discussion but appeared in three different guises:

- as separate blocks of meaning
- as tensions of contradiction and contrast
- as drivers and forces of influence

For the purposes of this paper the following sections will focus solely on the *tensions* as they appeared to the participants.

Tensions

Across these two ideas: education and business, there were tensions that the group felt needed resolution. The following chart captures some of what was discussed.
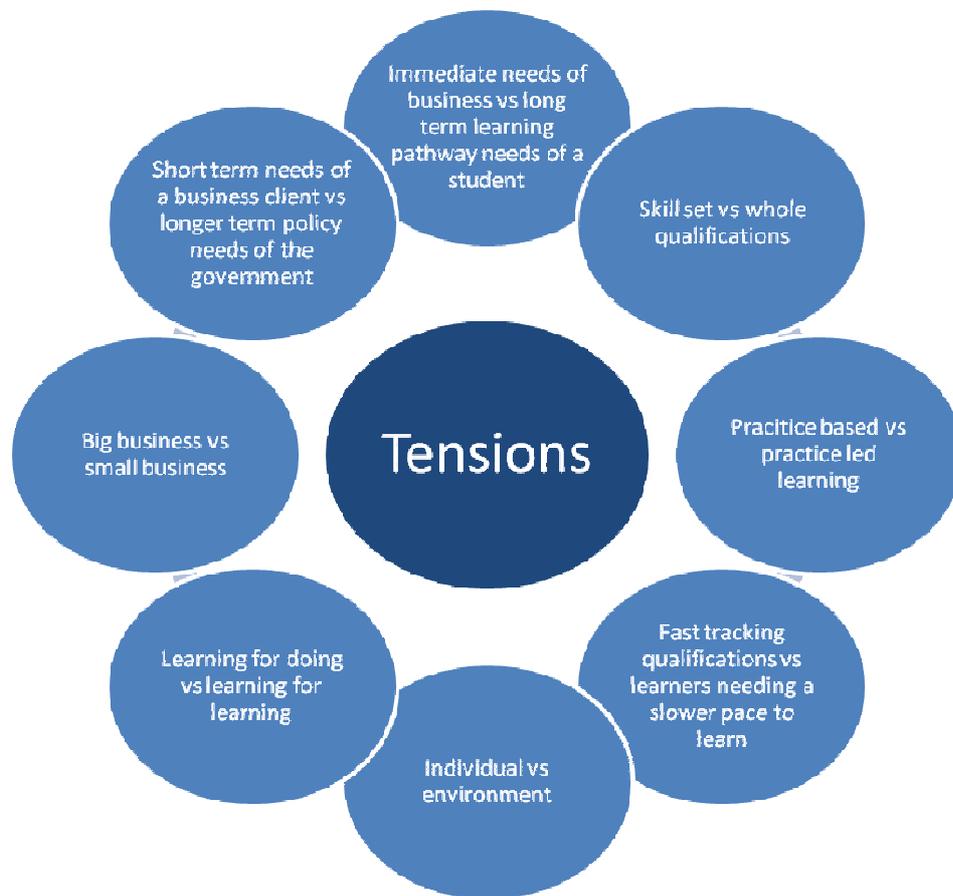

Figure 1: Tensions between education and business

The group thought that a new paradigm for VET pedagogy needed to be created in order to address these sometimes counter productive tensions. Brennan Kemmis (2008) described these tensions as 'dyads of tension', extremes along a continuum. The core of these tensions is the fact that VET pedagogy has to work across the spheres of both business and education. The difference between these two terms: business and education and the ways of thinking that are associated with them are not in themselves the cause of the tension. The tension lies in the fact that they are simultaneously located in the *one* VET system and must interconnect. Pat Forward's article *Contestability and the race to the bottom* (2008), provides a useful example of these ways of thinking and the issues their juxtaposition presents. Forward associates business and education with private and public and the effect the shift from public to private will have on equity and learning. Forward talks about 'a competition driven,

marketised, business-led VET system…[that] will produce social disadvantage, the exclusion of whole sections of society from educational participation and consign young workers to a narrow and instrumental training and working life.'(Forward, 2008). Although Forward's points relate specifically to the contestability debate they are also pertinent to the broader tensions between education and business, questions around who education is for and what it should look like.

These questions about who and what were also at the centre of many of the other tensions raised by the ALARA participants. If learning is practise led, where is the learning about why going to happen? If learning is fast tracked where is the time for the reflective processes required for a depth of knowledge? There was a concern that students would be missing out. Points were made about the value of teaching beyond just ticking the box; that students could be empowered by a study of the underpinning knowledge of their vocational domain. Work done by Bernstein speaks about the power and control that can be elicited by what is taught and how it is taught. His work on classification and framing describes how 'power and control are transmitted as a result of the way that content is classified and the way that interactions are framed' (Robertson 2003).

There were questions about the learning pathway of the student and about the student having the opportunity to learn not just for doing but for learning. The learner was perceived holistically and the role of the teacher was to consider a learner's overall development as an individual and as part of a larger social structure not just as a learner attending a class to achieve a competency. This emphasis on the pathway for the learner, doing more than the bare minimum and valuing their teaching beyond the classroom is also found in the writing of Kemmis and Smith.

> Educational praxis is purposive action – right educational conduct – which is guided by a moral purpose greater than the purpose of producing (just any) learning….*praxis* has the greater moral purpose of also bringing about the self-development of each individual learner in her or his interests and for the good of humankind. (Kemmis & Smith 2007)

The ALARA participants identified that business needed a productivity based VET system, one based on fast tracking, skill sets and immediacy. This emphasis on the business imperative of productivity is also part of the justification of this research project. That Australian society needs a more highly skilled workforce, as reported in the "New Directions Paper" and "Skilling Australia" (November 2007) is a reality. VET can provide a viable pathway to that highly skilled business workforce. But how that pathway is laid is what is important here. The participants at the ALARA conference grappled with this same question: how does VET pedagogy marry the short term, fast tracked, skill set needs of business to the individual learning needs of students? A study at this time exploring VET pedagogy, teasing out its essence, making it explicit, is vital.

Summary of Key Message Research

Some initial *principles* of pedagogy have been identified from the detailed study of several NCVER research reports. In distilling these principles it was very clear that they form part of a web of 'interactive complexity'. We realise the principles they do not exist in isolation and that the key pedagogical themes suggest that effective VET pedagogy requires involvement from VET practitioners, industry and government.

According to the NCVER research reports examined so far the VET practitioner should endeavour to
- Promote cultural understanding and respect
- Work collaboratively
- Cater for the differing needs of learners
- Apply constructivist principles
- Value all modes of learning
- Incorporate a high level of digital literacy in their teaching
- Engage in relevant professional development
- Embed the teaching of literacy and numeracy in all content areas

Industry and Business should
- Recognise and value the learners contribution to community
- Be responsible for effective workplace learning and assessment

- Ensure that educational effort is refocused on the learner
- Be aware of capacity building and take assertive action to address skill
- shortages.
- Provide a mentor

Sound VET pedagogy requires the Government to

- Plan for the future of VET
- Recognise VETs contribution to community
- Ensure the VET workforce are highly skilled and qualified
- Promote cultural respect
- Allow the customisation of training packages
- Ensure that policies on assessment are flexible, valid and equitable

Effective pedagogy that focuses on student learning and the development of the active and participating citizen requires a tripartite set of practices and commitments from teachers, business and industry, and government. Pedagogy is therefore not the province of teachers alone. The practice architectures that define the dimensions of the VET system and consequently the work of teachers, are explicitly related to and responsible for the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

Next phase of research

The next phase of the research will involve an examination of the parallels between the ALARA discussions and the NCVER reports. Consultation with the authors of the NCVER research reports will then be undertaken to cross check and validate the research findings.

The application of the theoretical framework will determine how effective VET pedagogy is, as measured against the Pedagogical Effectiveness Indicators.

The qualitative interviews and focus groups with various stakeholders will provide the research team with valuable information regarding what constitutes effective VET pedagogy, which will seek to determine the next steps in the development of an effective VET pedagogy.

The project will have achieved one of its outcomes if it forecasts the implications of the emerging VET pedagogy for policy makers, governments and industry given the changes in policy directions and the new funding initiatives. The challenge therefore is to create the conditions under which learning can occur by acknowledging that the high quality outcomes in VET are the mutual responsibility of all participants.

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