Challenges for continuing professional learning: Singapore's trainers

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Continuing professional development for a workforce that is largely casual within a new sector has many challenges. In an interventionist study involving Singaporean trainers delivering competency-based training (n=23) these challenges were identified as ranging from policy implementation, systems, curriculum design through to commonly used symbolic language such as "*imparting knowledge*". Singaporean trainers are committed, care deeply about their learners and actively seek out professional development. They want to know more about managing pedagogical processes, and understand pedagogical theory as it relates to practice. The aim of the study was to develop research capability and reflective practice. The study involved interviewing trainers to capture their reported pedagogical beliefs and enactment of these beliefs. Trainers undertook their own research project supported by a series of workshops where the researcher (the author) worked with them. Field notes of these workshops along with the initial interview data constitute the data for this paper which has two purposes; to describe the challenges of continuing professional development for a new workforce and to explore the implications and possibilities for addressing these challenges.

Introduction

This paper has two purposes; to describe the challenges of continuing professional development for a new Singapore workforce of Continuing Education and Training (CET) (the equivalent of Vocational Education and Training in Australia) practitioners and to explore the implications and possibilities for addressing these challenges.

In Singapore, provision of competency-based CET is undertaken entirely by private providers. The CET sector delivers a combination of competency based training under the Workforce Skills Qualifications (WSQ) (this framework is similar to the Australian Qualifications Framework) higher education through foreign universities and other forms of training for adults. Providers employ a small number of permanent employees, but most of their trainers are adjunct trainers, the similar to Australian casual trainers. The WSQ was established in 2004 and only six years later many of these trainers delivering WSQ units hold a qualification *introducing* practitioners to pedagogical concepts and practices, known as the Advanced Certificate in Training and Assessment (ACTA). In Singapore the Australian Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is accepted as the equivalent of ACTA.

Much competency-based training in Singapore is delivered in the classroom with no workplace component (Bound & Lin, 2010). A focus on classroom delivery brings particular challenges for these trainers in ensuring their pedagogical practices and what they deliver is relevant and up-to-date. Much of the approach trainers take is mediated by approved curriculum which they perceive cannot be changed except to contextualise (Bound, 2010). For some, the curriculum provides a safety net, but others consider it restrictive as there can be an emphasis on the use of Powerpoint and the 'imparting of knowledge' (ibid.)

The WSQ is overseen by a government agency, the Workforce Development Agency (WDA). The WDA approves curriculum, accredits providers and also audits them. The WDA is committed to professionalising the CET sector through developing qualifications such as the ACTA and in the last six months the Diploma of Continuing Education (DACE), along

with two Masters Courses. These initiatives have been developed by the Institute for Adult Learning (IAL). The IAL established the Adult Educator's Network (AEN) in November 2009 and now has over 500 individual members and 20 corporate members. In its first year of inception, the AEN focused its effort in raising awareness of members in the areas of pedagogical skills development, professional development pathways available for Adult educators and current trends in practice and pedagogy, through the organisation of 42 events and activities (overseas study trip & seminars), the formation of four Special Interest Groups (SIGs) and production and circulation of the AEN e-Alert. These initiatives are in the context of Government initiatives and considerable budget allocation to developing innovation and creativity in its workforce (ESC, 2010). This strategy poses further challenges for CET trainers and those who support them.

Literature

Salvo and Lupou (2009) note that in Europe, there has been "little attention paid to … the further professionalising of staff working in adult learning" (p. 2227). In Singapore, the process of professionalising the industry is quite recent, as is a system of competency based training. While there are a many studies exploring the pedagogical beliefs of school teachers (e.g. Fives, 2003; Chan & Elliot, 2004; Browne, Kelly & Sargent, 2008), the pedagogical beliefs of continuing education/vocational education trainers are unknown. The closing of the gap in our understanding of trainer's pedagogical knowledge can contribute to the professionalisation of this dedicated group of professionals by providing information for planning for professional learning in different industry sectors. In Singapore, the term 'pedagogy' appears to be strongly associated with teaching in schools and a strongly didactic, instrumental approach. A teacher's or trainer's pedagogy is defined in this paper as the beliefs and assumptions deeply embedded in the strategies and approaches used by practitioners. Pedagogical beliefs therefore may fall anywhere along a teacher/learner continuum.

Commitment to the continuing professionalisation of trainers identifies a need to clarify professional needs and purposes and the trajectory of this diverse group of professionals. However, the term professional development is problematic as it can be suggestive of a deficit model, where things are done *to* the professional who is perceived as lacking in aspects of their expertise (Webster-Wright, 2009). Professional *learning* on the other hand, implies that which the practitioner has control over and which is contributed to by interaction with others; important if opportunities for deepening professional expertise are to be meaningful and impact on changes in practice. Webster-Wright (2009) notes that "it is only through challenging implicit assumptions and questioning taken-for-granted practices that professional learning can lead to changes in practice" (p. 703). It is not easy to question taken-for granted assumptions; to identify and name them and restructure conceptual frameworks (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985) then change what you have always done. The study (Bound, 2010) on which this paper draws its data was designed to provide opportunities for practitioners to gather data about their experiences and reflect on their findings and its implications for practice, thus providing opportunities for reflection, and dialogue based on evidence. The process of data collection and exposure to multiple perspectives exposes the qualitative researcher to new experiences and in the process to a 'messy area' (Cook, 2009). In this 'messy' area, long held views can be disrupted, seen for the first time perhaps through what is reflected back to the researcher in the data they have collected and analysed. This is one approach to professional learning, but professional learning is more far-reaching than practitioner research and dialogue. Professional learning can be understood as a range of activities, structured and unstructured which contribute to a practitioner's constantly evolving

notions of pedagogy and practice. Such activities may include for example, training in a variety of settings, providing opportunities for dialogue comparing strategies and approaches between settings and learners.

The literature on professional development generally considers context and learning as separate (Webster-Wright, 2009), yet perhaps the single most important influence on reflection and learning is context (Boud & Walker, 1998, p. 196). What is meant by context varies; it is multi-dimensional, somewhat amorphous and difficult to conceptualise. Webster-Wright (2009) for example, note that professionals are socialized into ways of thinking and acting, shaping ways of being and learning, power relations and voice. This suggests that context refers to professional discourses and the working relations professionals work in and with. In this paper context is understood as being embedded in our activity, the trajectories we follow, the tools we have access to and use, and the relations we live and work in and with (Bound, 2007). What individuals believe and how they act and their influence on contextual conditions is understood as shaped by historical, cultural and social conditions that are reflected in mediational tools such as language, symbols and the media (Wertsch, 1991; Wertsch, del Rio & Alvarez, 1995).

The nature of the contract (Newman, 1993) trainers have with their providers, the culture and structure of the provider, the pedagogy embedded in curriculum documents are all examples of contextual dimensions. Access to professional learning opportunities is mediated by the culture of the provider (CET provider) which in turn is mediated by policy such as quality assurance requirements, the domain knowledge of the WSQ framework being delivered and the provider's relationships with their industry and the companies within that industry. In a study of structures and cultures in Australian Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) (n=10), Clayton, Fisher, Harris, Bateman and Brown (2008) found that different cultures in small RTOs (these are closer to Singaporean CET providers than the large public Australian RTOs) were related to different ways of doing business, leadership, relationships and credibility with employers, amongst other factors. In the Australian context relationships with employers form part of the communities of practice for trainers, providing opportunities for informal professional learning. For example, Bound and Salter (2007) found that VET trainers in the building industry were inclined to use open questions when assessing on-the-job, but tended to use more closed questions when training in the classroom. As Webster-Wright (2009) note, workplace learning for effective Continuing Professional Learning is of central importance.

Methodology

This paper draws on interview and workshop data from an interventionist study designed to develop reflective practice and research capability for trainers from two different industry sectors, participating in the project. Trainers taking part in the project participated in workshops where they developed and planned out their own research. Trainers (n=19) and their management (n=4) were interviewed prior to the commencement of workshops to gather information about their pedagogical beliefs and enactment of these beliefs. For this paper interview data, along with field-notes and minutes from the workshops conducted as part of guiding practitioners through the research process as they undertake their own projects has been drawn on. Of the two providers (herein referred to as Provider 1 and Provider 2) who took part in the project, Provider 1 trainers elected to study the experience of their learners in WSQ programmes; and Provider 2 trainers investigated, 'In what ways does curriculum design enable participants to apply the competencies at work?' These projects are stand alone projects, but sit under the umbrella of this project, *Reflexive practitioner research for*

professional learning in CET. The research was designed to provide opportunities for professional learning for participating trainers. In addition to this qualitative data a national online survey of the population of WSQ trainers (n=2282) was conducted with 592 responses. Data is being analysed at the time of writing.

Findings and discussion
The trainers interviewed ranged in the number of years they had been training, from two years at time of interviewing to more than 10 years. For the most part, trainers are highly qualified; however a surprising number, do not have ACTA. Of the eight trainers who do not hold ACTA, one has undertaken a number of modules and another two are in the process of undertaking ACTA. Three trainers hold post graduate qualifications in fields other than education and training, but do not hold an undergraduate degree, illustrating the varied pathways adults follow in developing their qualification profiles. Of the qualifications trainers hold, ACTA is the only qualification that provides trainers with some pedagogical knowledge and skill. Trainers have pedagogical questions and issues such as, what cognitive level do we expect of our learners? How do we encourage engagement and participation? What assists learners apply what they learn in class? To what extent do work-books encourage deep learning? This is an indication of committed professionals with a strong identity with the profession, requiring opportunities for exploration.

Opportunities for professional learning undertaken by trainers include short courses related to domain knowledge and to training, as well as seminars and workshops. Professional learning consists of being part of communities of practice and meetings in which issues are discussed and there is potential for learning. For Provider 2 the most popular sessions are related to updating domain knowledge (91%) compared to only 64% of courses related to training. The reverse of this is true for Provider 1, where 71% attended domain knowledge sessions and 86% attended formal sessions related to training.

Trainers actively seek to and do attend considerable professional development and learning activities. Given that for both providers there is strong support of activities organised by the provider, it is important for providers to have not only an active professional learning programme, but to strategically develop such programmes. Issues related to professional learning identified by trainers can be categorised into three groups:
- Keeping up to date with industry change;
- Managing pedagogical processes; and
- Understanding pedagogical theory as it relates to practice.

Keeping up to date with industry practice to ensure that what trainers deliver is current and relevant was something of concern to nearly all participants, more so amongst Provider 2 trainers. Managing pedagogical processes includes a desire to learn more about, for example, managing time and content to avoid superficial learning as evident in the following quotes from the study, "*are learners who do not participate in group work actually learning?*", or seeing other methods in use, and "*how can I help [the participants] learn better?*". Structuring of the learning experience is critical to trainers managing and juggling curriculum, trainee needs and their learning. Trainers expressed a desire for access to formal opportunities to better understand pedagogical theory as it relates to practice.

Formal support and performance management
Performance management processes provide opportunities to receive and provide feedback, access to courses, seminars and conferences. Each of the providers participating in the study has in place a formal process for performance management including an organised induction

process for new adjunct and permanent trainers and assessors. New appointees are observed by full time appointees and feedback given. Both Providers use a rating system. Provider 1 has developed a full handbook and standard operating procedures for trainers and assessors. The trainer observation report covering twenty competencies organised into four sections is part of the handbook. Both providers continue to observe trainers and provide feedback, in one case twice a year (unless the standard of the trainer requires more feedback) and in the other case, quarterly. Both Providers monitor those who fall under a certain standard.

Trainers are assigned a mentor who is a permanent employee. However, a number of adjunct trainers indicated that before going to their mentor they seek clarification and/or input from someone they know better, as once the mentor is approached it is "*official*". In addition adjunct trainers indicate it can be quite difficult to gain access to their mentor, as they are busy and between the different training schedules it is difficult to find a time to meet.

Full-time trainers have access to courses, seminars and conferences. Adjunct trainers attending sessions often have to choose between the session and earning income. Provider 1 has an ongoing community of practice open to all trainers, however response to this community of practice is varied, with one participant indicating the value of opportunities for sharing and another indicating that the employment arrangements and subsequent divisions between full-time and adjunct trainers strongly limits possibilities for sharing information.
We don't really share much information because of the conflicts of interest, because schools will give classes to full-time trainers first, usually. So then it's the turn for the associate trainer [adjunct]. That's why associate trainers will not share much information with us; it's a very distinct two groups of people.

A number of trainers expressed an interest in accessing opportunities to learn more about pedagogical issues, as summed up in the following quote.
Adjunct trainers we are on our own, and where can I learn other than ACTA? There are very limited resources.
One trainer commented that courses on how to train effectively provided externally,
Usually go on about that same thing which is humour. I'm more interested in some theories to explain how things can be more effective and I think theories are important it's a good way to ground explanations. I don't know where I can find all this; I would prefer some short courses program which is more immediate.

However, another aspect of the reported lack of access to formal professional development is the extent to which trainers perceive opportunities such as meetings "*to get suggestions for modules*" and "*there are regular meetings where we can share our problems*" where feedback is welcomed as part of professional development. Perception is one aspect; the other is the extent of access. Full time employees can readily attend such sessions, however, adjunct trainers may be missing opportunities to generate income by attending such sessions. One adjunct trainer commented,
Any activities I will just participate ... 'cause otherwise we just conduct, okay, finished the assessment, pass that, and then a new class again, so we never have the time to sit down and think about this.
This comment suggests that the extent to which professional learning is an implicit part of the identity of trainers is mediated by the structure and timing of their work as well as the extent to which individual agency is exercised in relation to continuous professional learning.

Peer support as in informal exchanges and guidance that occurs in and out of the workplace (i.e. at the provider) does not appear to be extensive or valued by either Provider. For

example, one trainer mentioned there is some close friendships amongst some of the group where they talk about how they can "*improve the system*", the materials, assessment methods, sharing of student profiles to prepare each other for classes coming up. Another trainer commented that, "*I hardly have much opportunity to interact with my peers*". The ways in which most trainers appear to have built-in opportunities for peer support are through the scheduled observations of their training.

Reflection

Reflection is a critical aspect of professional learning and the potential to question taken for granted assumptions. Trainers reported they reflected to "*improve myself*", and "*how can I do it better next time?*" The following quotes from different trainers are evidence of the way in which reflection is deeply embedded in the way they work.

> *After every class I reflect ... within my brain when I'm having my morning break or having breakfast, talking to my wife or whatever.*
> *I think I do it constantly I am never satisfied, so I tend to adapt.*
> *I always think about how can I do my class better if I give this class again. At the end or middle of the day I'll spend 5 minutes, how was my delivery.*

Overt ways of reflecting, such as reported in the quotes above, are not the experience of every trainer. One trainer commented that she reflects as part of her preparation if the "*stakes are high I do a bit more preparation and homework*". Reflection is an inherent part of the preparation process; it is another point at which trainers reflect on previous practice. Trainers ask themselves "*how can I do it better next time?*", "*what has gone wrong?*", look at assessment results, use comments from feedback sheets from learners and, "*I will take note of what they did not like and I take note of what they like and I improve myself on the likes*". They ask questions such as, *How can I help learners learn better? Are learners who do not participate in group work actually learning? How do I adapt the methods and structure of content to meet and manage learners' learning styles?* Typically however, trainers were concerned with technical issues; ensuring what they deliver is relevant, managing curriculum requirements and time, and ensuring they have learner's attention.

> *The challenge for me is how can I conduct, impart the knowledge such that they can learn and then at the same time I can finish on time ... what are the things that I can take out and what the things that I should emphasise, highlight and at the same time help them to learn?*

The quotes above are all examples of reflection undertaken by the individual; opportunities for collective reflection were rare or took place as part of the feedback of being observed. Reflection involves feelings and emotions (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985) which is why being in a reflective space (physical, temporal, emotional and cognitively) and being part of a supportive group, is important. Given the structure and intensity of the work of both full-time and adjunct trainers and in the case of adjunct trainers, limited opportunities for formal and informal professional learning with others, it is not surprising that the trainers interviewed did not report engaging in reflection that requires a critical examination of underlying beliefs and assumptions that result in shifts in pedagogical practice. However, given the opportunity to engage in practitioner research and using their data as the source for questioning, trainers did engage in grappling with questions and issues that can result in rethinking practice.

For example, Provider 2 practitioners who at the time of writing of this report had interviewed trainers and learners and analysed their curriculum document and had begun to analyse it were grappling with issues such as:
- Transfer of learning, what facilitates it?
- How to distinguish passive learning from applied learning?

- Examining the links between training and assessment–issues around assessment of learning and/or assessment *for* and *as* learning.
- The theory/practice nexus and ways of assessing.
- How to write curriculum so the learner is at the centre.
- Relationships between using activities e.g. case studies, levels of cognition (Workshops).

Professional development and learning

There is clear evidence that practitioners involved in this project are strongly motivated to participate in professional learning and development opportunities. As would be expected, each provider has different professional development and learning opportunities for their practitioners. Both providers use observations and feedback to practitioners, however, one provider has developed this process far more extensively. This process aside, pedagogical support for practitioners appears to be somewhat random as it is based largely on access to full-time staff in their role of mentor. Access is problematic from the perspective of time and the quality of support; full-time staff have multiple roles, including training thereby limiting the time they have available for mentoring. In addition, in some instances, full-time staff may not have as much experience and/or pedagogical knowledge as the adjunct. Our data showed that in quite a number of cases, the adjunct staff were more innovative and displayed deeper pedagogical knowledge than some of the full-time staff. However, there are informal communities of support amongst practitioners, and in the case of one provider a formalised community of practice.

The large number of adjunct practitioners in the sector poses particular challenges for accessing professional learning. Practitioners participating in this project appear to prefer to access training offered by the provider. It would be useful to understand why this is the case. Is it because of the contextualisation? Is it to do with established relationships and informal communities of practice, or other reasons? Understanding why this preference and how extensive this preference is across the CET practitioner community have implications for the design of continuous professional learning for the sector.

Interest in managing pedagogical processes and understanding pedagogical theory as it relates to practice indicate practitioners are seeking to find ways of engaging learners, but for many of these practitioners, there is a focus on self as practitioner. The language used by practitioners, such as "*imparting knowledge*", "*engaging learners*", "*self-discovery*" have different meanings for each person and the meaning of the latter terms do not match the theories from which the terms engaging learning and self-discovery originate. Curriculum and the implementation of policy initiatives mediate practitioner's enactment of the curriculum (Bound, 2010). Professional learning for practitioners then cannot be conceived in a vacuum. If practitioners are given increased exposure to and opportunities to engage in critical dialogue that, for example, develops a shared language (Berry & Scheele, 2007) with which to critique and develop deeper understandings and encouragement to experiment with different approaches, to what extent does such an outcome match with the context in which they are training? Provider management, curriculum designers, policy–makers, auditors and so on are all stakeholders in a process of change underpinning the very idea of continuing professional development. The question then needs to be asked, professional learning and development for what and for who?

Practitioners have a deep concern for their learners and for many in this study, the opportunity to learn more about the learner (Watkins & Mortimore, 1999) and the process of learning are valued. If continuous professional learning were to have, for example, a focus on learning and the learner, this would require a critical reflective stance. While practitioners

engage in reflection, it is not *critical* reflection. Indeed, as stated by Borko (2004, p. 7) "discussions that support critical examination of teaching are relatively rare" and "developing teacher communities is time consuming and difficult." (2004) suggests it is important to bring the classroom or teaching environment to the professional development setting. So for example, videos of sessions, samples of work, and plans are all artefacts for examining practice and developing ideas for improvement. However such approaches require more than the artefacts to develop a *critical* reflective stance; it requires a shared language, and theoretical frameworks with which to provide alternative lenses to critique.

Challenges for professional learning

There are a number of different contextual layers in the challenges for continuing professional learning for this sector. These contextual layers include national policy, the dispersement of trainers across some 400 private providers, the historical context of learners that trainers teach expecting to be told and to remember as they had experienced in their school days, and the similar learning autobiography of trainers, unless they studied offshore. Challenges can be summed up as:
- The youthfulness of the sector resulting in varied pedagogical knowledge across the sector;
- Policy and its interpretation by providers and trainers;
- Varied knowledge and skills within providers to develop professional learning programs;
- Limited access to opportunities to develop and share pedagogical knowledge.

Given that competency-based training has only been delivered in Singapore since 2004, much has already been achieved in the development of, and extensive enrolments in the ACTA. The Diploma of Continuing Education and Training (DACE) commenced in October 2010. The hope is that this course, which is far more rigorous than ACTA will contribute extensively to the development of pedagogical knowledge in the sector. To cater for trainers who hold a Masters Degree, a Master of Training and Development (Griffith University) and A Master of Arts in Lifelong Learning (University of London) are offered. In addition the AEN, through its well attended formal seminars, visits to innovative sites and special interest groups contributes to providing opportunities for continuing professional learning. However, it is interesting to note that only a small number of the trainers participating in the *Reflexive practitioner research for professional learning in CET* study attended AEN events.

Policy such as the requirement that curriculum is developed, approved and audited, including by personnel who may not have extensive pedagogical knowledge contributes to teacher-centred delivery. The emphasis on classroom delivery impacts negatively on opportunities for professional learning limiting exposure to diverse environments and management of multiple stakeholders. Although there is no difference in how different modes of delivery are funded, funding is outcome-based, and thus some training providers may be more inclined to focus solely on classroom-based training as there is a perception that on-the-job training takes a longer time to deliver outcomes. For example, between 2006 and 2009, a total of 22,781 programs were designed. Of these only 16 programmes were designed to include on-the-job experience, 126 with a practical/practicum component, and one with supervised field training. None identified online learning as a form or component of delivery (Bound & Lin, 2010). The role of research in identifying these issues is valued by WDA and findings from studies undertaken in 2010 (Bound, 2010; Bound & Lin, 2010) have already been sourced as evidence of a need for change.

Professional learning opportunities arranged by the Providers in this study are mainly structured experiences and opportunities to receive feedback through being observed. At this stage there is little evidence of the nature of this feedback. The data also illustrates that adjunct trainers have limited access to their mentors, as time is an issue for the adjuncts and the permanent trainers, as indicated by comments of this permanent trainer:

I am teaching so many different classes, so I try to adopt a strategy as a facilitator so I don't have to study that much, because it's a never-ending story. I try to study everything, try to prepare everything; I also feedback to the management and say 'Can I focus on just a few modules so I can go into depth' but the management told me I have to do all these modules, so I can't cope, so I adopt the strategy to become a facilitator instead of a lecturer.

Apart from providing an indication of a high workload caused by the wide spread of different topics the trainer needs to be familiar with, this lamentation leads us to ask, how does this trainer understand what it is to facilitate? This issue of the use of terminology and its different meanings to different people is further identified in the comments of another trainer

What excites me is to be able to impart the knowledge to the people,...I would see myself as a facilitator; not so much in terms of giving knowledge and information but it's more sharing of experiences.

Many interviewees spoke about sharing of experiences meaning that they shared their stories and experiences. One trainer commented that if time permits at the end of a session he asks learners, "*What do you think about the story*?" and asks them to write down or articulate how they would apply what they have taken from the story. One of his major challenges is, "*the whole application, it is very difficult*".

Trainers are asking questions about their practice, but at this stage appear to have limited structured opportunities to explore alternative perspectives. The future trajectory of trainers in the CET sector is one where there will be an expectation that they continue to develop their pedagogical knowledge, skill and work through changes in their everyday practice. Demands placed upon trainers in response to the national push to develop innovation and creativity require not only changes in practice, but system changes.

Conclusion

The AEN is an important contributor to the professionalisation of the sector, as are the range of courses available. The challenges facing the sector move beyond these programs. An approach that targets individual trainers will only achieve so much. Professional learning models for the sector must address the needs of all stakeholders, including those involved in developing policy and undertaking audits. The challenges facing the sector suggest there is a need for:

- A re-examination of systems and policy that inadvertently encourage teacher centred approaches;
- Work to be undertaken with providers to develop values and systems that encourage risk taking, the sharing of learning and asking hard questions and development of support systems;
- That these qualities in organisations be rewarded through policy initiatives and system practices;
- Providers and other relevant agencies to establish and share resources that will enable trainers to pose questions about their practice and receive support, develop a shared language and deepen understandings of theoretical frameworks;
- Trainers to engage in professional learning activities on a regular basis. These activities must be meaningful, authentic, enable trainers to better understand their own professional learning and give them voice;

- The use of artefacts of and from learning settings (e.g. videos of sessions, samples of work, lesson plans) to trigger critical dialogue and reflection;
- Ongoing research for research informed practice and policy.

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