

# Janus or Clio: narrative history and its place in VET research

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## Abstract

*The paper argues that it is to the Greek goddess Clio and not the Etruscan and Roman god Janus that we should turn when 'reflecting back, projecting forward' in VET research. After all, it was Clio, Zeus's daughter, who served as muse to humankind's first attempts to narrate and understand the events of the past. Janus, though a symbol of change and transition, and credited with simultaneously seeing the past and the future, is, unlike Clio, rarely considered an interpreter and critic of those pasts and presents. It is through Clio's legacy of the discipline of history, then, that we must examine the assumptions and methodologies that offer hope for productively examining the past for kernels of future action. It is suggested that narrative history, as an honoured form of the discipline, with its emphasis on investigating and explaining the specific (the ideographic) in contrast with 'conventional' social science's search for universal hypotheses (the nomothetic), offers a powerful and accessible approach to researching VET's particular and often idiosyncratic pasts, both for their own sake and for the 'lessons' they may reveal for future VET practice. The paper suggests several such idiosyncratic lenses and briefly narrates their contribution to explain current trajectories in VET policy making and practice; for example, the philosophy of British bananism (separation of hand and eye); the influence of the Australian Constitution and its failure to include a clear statement on education; the 1942 tax Act, which empowered forever a formerly fiscally weak national government; post-WWII scientific management or Taylorism, which shaped a generation of industrial organisation and workplace training; post-1950s higher education reform; and, of course, the 1975 Kangan report, which gave the VET sector a name, identity and much needed funding. The paper concludes with suggestions for future VET research trajectories.*

## Introduction

It is refreshing to observe that the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) has adopted the historical theme of 'Janus – Reflecting back, projecting forward' for its 2011 Melbourne conference (though, one notes, the program does not include a practising historian as a keynote speaker). In many ways it signals the maturing of AVETRA and its capacity to reflect on a fourteen year history (Miller, 2007), a period not coincidentally parallel with the emergence of sector it researches. As the newest sector with the oldest history, Vocational Education and Training (VET), first named in the early 1990s (Smith and Keating, 2003: 40-56) after jettisoning the shell of its predominantly public vocational education persona - represented as "TAFE" or 'the Tech system' - in favour of a mixed public and private model, it has assumed a high profile as the training saviour of the Australian economy. No longer tagged the 'rag bag', 'Cinderella' or 'etcetera' sector (Hermann *et al*, 1976: 35; Murray Smith, 1971:313), New Millennium VET and AVETRA have formed a perhaps too comfortable relationship of mutual bolstering, the former further legitimated though critical yet ultimately affirming research, the latter through members and fellow travellers winning research funding through various national grant mechanisms, none more so than the National Centre

for Vocational Education and Research (NCVER). Given the general 'Just in Time' nature of much of this research and its tying to the pragmatic policy and practice needs of government and industry (and guided through annually stated research priorities) (<http://www.ncver.edu.au/research/priorities.html>. Accessed 25 January 2011), it is timely that a conference theme now offers VET researchers, practitioners, policy makers and observers a chance to stand back a little and reflect, critically if possible, on where AVETRA and the VET sector have come from and where they are going to, and invest the lessons gained in future planning for research and sectoral practice.

It might be suggested, too, that the selection of Janus, the Etruscan and Roman god who opens and shuts, the porter of heaven, and the harbinger of the year ('Jan' – uary) (Smith, 1858: 352), rather than the Greek goddess Clio (Smith, 1858: 460), the muse of history, a daughter of Zeus who inspires reflection on the past (for example, as the logo of Melbourne University Press, publisher of many iconic Australian historical works), represents a tentativeness, even uncertainty, of AVETRA to engage in the project of self-reflection and criticism. While Janus is considered contemporarily as capable of looking forwards and backwards, and therefore an appropriate conference *leitmotif*, this is most likely a misreading of his role in Etruscan and Roman history. So, it is perhaps to Clio rather than Janus that we should turn to seek inspiration for the conference themes; for example, 'Reflecting back...lessons for the future', which this paper addresses.

The paper is organised into five sections reflecting indirectly the suggested conference presentation guidelines (<http://avetra.org.au/annual-conference/final-papers-submission>. Accessed 27 January 2011). The abstract and introduction establish the paper's parameters. The literature review and methodology permeate the paper as it is constructed according to the conventions of narrative history writing: the paper itself is a literature review and the methodology assumed through the unstated conventions of archival and documentary research (O'Toole and Beckett, 2010: 59-60). Taking this into account a case is made for the value of contemporary narrative historical research and representation as a lens to view, interpret and critique the past. A brief overview is given of the discipline's development and its re-working through a cautious re-reading of core postmodern ideas (Rushbrook, 2004; Rushbrook, 2007). A central argument is the value of narrative history assumptions in explaining the unique and the idiosyncratic. Next, several historical examples are drawn from the vocational education and related literature to mine meaning for the construction of contemporary and future VET practice. Finally, there is a brief discussion of the potential of narrative history to contribute to VET research methodologies.

### **(Post) modernising traditional narrative history**

Among narrative historians, then, it is Clio rather than Janus who continues to inspire. W. K. Hancock, arguably Australia's best known international historical scholar, practised research premised on his understanding of the Ancient Greek verb that both defines and enacts Clio's historical endeavour: first, 'I find out by inquiry'; second, 'I narrate what I have found out. Inquiry and narration – that is my craft' (Hancock, 1954: 209). Historical research as the *process* of inquiry with the *product* of narrative remains a disciplinary core into the New Millennium, though, as Lawrence Stone reminds us, may now reside also in one of 'many mansions' (Stone, 1979:4), an

interdisciplinary panoply of history melded with literary theory, sociology, political science, economics or psychology, to name but a few (Windschuttle, 1994).

In less disciplinary complex times, classical history was re-engineered into the modern era by nineteenth-century German Romantic Leopold von Ranke. Ranke's principles of historical research underpin, though not uncritically, much that passes today as narrative history best-practice. In establishing history as a university-based discipline Ranke's first principle was '*Wie es eigentlitch gewesen*, or finding out and narrating history 'how essentially it was' (Evans, 2000: 17; Thompson, 2000: 4). Often disparagingly referred to as 'historicism', the approach rests on three principles (Tosh, 2002: 9-12): first, that there is a gulf separating the present from the past – it is indeed a 'foreign country'; the historian's difficult task is to understand and represent the 'mentalities' or 'Otherness' of the past while taking into account his or her 'presentist' assumptions (Thompson, 2000: 4). Second, to better capture these resonances, the historian pays particular attention to *context*, or placing the object of investigation within the age or ages that gave it shape. Third is the recognition of historical *process* or the interconnectivity of events over time. This awareness contributes to the 'much bigger question of how we got from "then" to "now"' (Tosh, 2000: 11).

Ranke's rendition of historicism was underwritten by his introduction to modern history of a rigorous process of inquiry to interrogate the written records of the past, or 'primary sources'. Drawn from Philology and its brief to authenticate a text's veracity with regard to authorship, the methodology forms the bedrock of the narrative historian's craft. Documents are tested for their authenticity, consistency of relationship with similar documents, internal meaning and capacity to provide insights into the thinking of the age.

Once verified the documentary record is used to reconstruct and represent, however imperfectly, the period and events under investigation (Evans, 2000: 18). The narrative employed, according to Roberts (1996: 222), is constructed as a 'reason-giving account of why past actors did what they did' and is the *product* of the *process* of historical inquiry. Further, Roberts continues, 'Narrative historians tell stories about the past because human beings are narrative creatures and action is narrative in character' (Roberts, 1996: 223). 'Gaps' in the evidence informing the story or narrative may be interpreted through employing historian R. G. Collingwood's 'historical imagination', an *a priori* 'web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by statements of the [historian's] authorities' (Collingwood, 1989: 242; Russell, 2004: 106). The Rankean method is considered 'scientific' in a modernist sense as the investigative process, regardless of initial hypothesis, problem-posing or theoretical positioning must be prepared to be challenged by the historical investigator's dialogue with the sources: 'The first prerequisite of the serious historical researcher must be the ability to jettison dearly-held interpretations in the face of the recalcitrance of the evidence' (Evans, 2000: 120). This claim to scientific status, though, is often in spite of the natural sciences positioning of the social sciences as 'the poor relation' (Macintyre, 2010).

Using this brief, traditional narrative history is able to illustrate the diversity of human achievement, or not, over time. And, more particularly, according to Evans, history is able to '[restore] individual human beings to history, where social science approaches [have] more or less written them out' (Evans, 2000:248). This is accounting for a

range of pasts as worthwhile projects in themselves, without necessarily referring to utility. In doing so, however, such projects *may* provide utility through historical examples of possibilities for ‘alternative futures’ (Silver, 1990: 1-30) and a sense of ‘what is durable and contingent in our present condition’ (Tosh, 1991: 19). In so doing the tools of the historian may also be turned to undermine, ‘myths which simplify or distort popular interpretations of the past’ (Tosh, 1991: 21).

After several millennia history has served humankind well. The Rankean method, an upgrade on classical or antiquarian history, has critically absorbed many of the assumptions of the Enlightenment project, in particular the belief that language is able to represent accurately past realities, that ‘the truth is out there’, and that the traditional narrative historian enjoys a privileged authority and relationship with his or her sources.

Narrative historians, however, also possess a capacity for self-reflection, self-criticism and change. While retaining faith with Rankean empiricism and induction, they have addressed and captured many ideas suggested as critique by postmodernist discourse (White, 1995; Berkhofer, 1995). Postmodernism’s attention to language, culture and ideas, for example, has led to a reassessment of traditional methods of explanation and interpretation. There is a rider, however, that concentration on the ‘linguistic turn’ does not divert attention from the fact that ‘the poor in the past paid for their poverty in the real, physical coinage of disease, suffering and death’ (Evans, 2000: 184-5). Discourse analysis has enabled a deeper reading of documentary sources and tools for reflection on the historian’s own subjectivity in representing his or her findings. It has forced a fresh self-consciousness on the historian’s methods used to construct narrative. With such reflection and a caution founded on experience, one historian concludes that though ‘narratives are certainly moulded by the historian’s aesthetic sense...they are not inventions’ (Tosh, 2002: 196). Postmodern rejection of ‘grand narratives’, such as technological and moral progress or the inevitability of democracy, has added complexity to subjects already under investigation (Evans, 2000; Thompson, 2000; Tosh, 2002). Nor are traditional narrative historians too fussed about postmodernist claims that traditional narrative historians seek a form of absolute ‘truth’. Evans, for example suggests: ‘No historians really believe in the *absolute* truth of what they are writing, simply in its *probable* truth, which they have done their utmost to establish by following the usual rules of evidence’ (Evans, 2000: 219).

However, as Tosh claims, ‘there is a limit beyond which narrative historians will not go in embracing Postmodernism (Tosh, 2002: 194). These include postmodernism’s *outright* rejection of the idea of non-discursive realities and their capacity to be represented through language: ‘to maintain that *no* text from the past can be read as an accurate reflection of something outside itself flies in the face of common experience’ (Tosh, 2002: 195). Evans supports the contention that language and grammar are not arbitrary signifiers, claiming they ‘have evolved through contact with the real historical world in an attempt to reconstruct it’ (Evans, 2000: 112). A key task of the historian, then, is ‘to identify these conventions in their historical specificity, and to take full account of them in interpreting the sources’ (Tosh, 2002: 195). Respect for historicity then remains fundamental to the narrative historian’s craft and perhaps a source of irreconcilable difference with postmodernism.

In practising their craft of storytelling (Evans, 2000: 74; Russell, 2004: 106) narrative historians have rarely been predisposed to excessive theoretical musings, not from incapacity but rather from an awareness borne of the experience of sacrificing 'the intricacies of history before the god of tidy theory' (Selleck, 1994: 171). Perhaps it was with this in mind that Hancock exclaimed: 'Let historians leave to others the pursuit of abstraction' (Hancock, 1954: 208). However, as Roberts remarks, 'The fact that historians prefer to practise their metaphysics than talk about them does not mean they cannot and should not be discussed and defended' (Roberts, 1996: 225). This challenge suggests that the discipline ought to engage with those aspects of theory that enable it to challenge the naysayers threatening to tear down its core assumptions.

A guiding principle for eschewing theory in favour of complex story telling is the narrative historian's penchant for explaining the specific or 'ideographic' rather than searching for 'nomothetic' universal rules or laws, the domain of other social science disciplines such as sociology and economics. Consequently, historical hypotheses tend to be revealed contextually or thematically rather than as a series of specific preliminary statements (Musgrave, 1970: 1-9). Ideographic knowledge, then, 'is grounded in the study of the uniqueness of personalities, events and processes, while nomothetic knowledge seeks general laws that subsume all possible individual cases' (Holmes, Hughes and Julian, 2007:45).

Contrary to postmodernist claims of slavish adherence to Enlightenment project conceptual canons, traditional narrative historians actually practise their craft as theoretical bower birds, selecting eclectically those glittering baubles aiding their search for meaning, interpretation and explanation (Campbell and Sherrington, 2002: 47). Though undertaken with a 'bottom-line' drawn over notions of representation, contextual understanding and modest truth claims, this theoretical eclecticism does not preclude the incorporation of postmodernist thinking: grand narratives are treated with suspicion; absolute 'truth' is rarely claimed; 'presentist' or contemporarily situatedness is explicitly acknowledged; source materials are vigorously, even discursively analysed; consideration of the past as 'Other' remains central to historical understanding; and the language of narrative representation is consciously considered in any authorial act. As Tosh remarks, Historians 'know that the sources do not "speak" directly, that facts are selected, not given, that historical explanation depends on the application of hindsight, and that every historical account is in some sense moulded by the aesthetic and political preferences of the writer' (Tosh, 2002: 198). However, as Evans reminds those who may respond that this denies the possibility of truth claims: 'In the end it is not the case that two historical arguments which contradict each other are equally valid, that there is no means of deciding between them as history because they are necessarily based on different political and historical philosophies. It is one thing to say different historians use the same sources to ask different questions, quite another to say that they use them for the same question and come up with diametrically opposed answers...these arguments cannot be both correct' (Evans, 2000: 219-220). The truth thus mediated, speaks.

So then, what can knowers of Clio offer the VET researcher? Given that traditional narrative history may claim, through theoretical eclecticism and archival and documentary research methodologies, both contemporary ontological and epistemological licence to inquire and narrate the past, is it able to offer the VET researcher a vision of 'alternative futures' through mining meaning from the example of past comparable events? It is to this challenge I now turn.

## **The past is a foreign country: examples and prospects for VET**

The 1953 L. P. Hartley novel *The Go Between* opens with the famous sentence, ‘The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.’ This suggests, as discussed above, that a contemporary reading of historical events requires a complex understanding of ‘Other’ pasts, a capacity to put oneself in past shoes. The French *Annales* school acknowledges that this is extremely difficult as it demands an awareness of the ‘mentalities’ underpinning material life, including contingent and changing forms of social organisation and the agential time of individuals (Tosh, 1991: 125; Evans, 2000: 154-155; Thompson, 2000: 30). Australian historian Greg Denning refers to this capacity as the ability to engage with ‘Deep Time’: ‘that feeling for the past that can only be matched by the hours, the days, the months, the years she or he sits at the desks of the archives’ (Denning, 2004: 42-43).

In recent work on VET history I have applied theoretical constructs to the reading of an industrial training accident and social memory (Rushbrook, 2008) social class and the development of Victorian Junior Technical Schools (Rushbrook and Preston, 2009), and policy theory and the emergence of middle-level certificate programs (Rushbrook, 2007a) and the Kangan Report (2010). In this paper, based on the assumptions of ‘deep time’ engagement with the VET sector, I will flag briefly five historical constructs that I believe inform sectoral trajectories in various ways: the philosophy of British banausicism (separation of hand and eye); the influence of the Australian Constitution and its failure to include a clear statement on education; the 1942 Tax Act, which empowered forever a formerly fiscally weak national government; post-WWII scientific management or Taylorism, which shaped a generation of industrial organisation and workplace training; post-1950s higher education reform; and, of course, the 1975 Kangan report, which gave the VET sector a name, identity and much needed funding. They have been selected as examples of historical ‘lenses’ that pre-figure and inform many contemporary VET narratives. They have been outlined without integration or critique within or from a theoretical position. This is not to say, though, that this will not occur in future work as these constructs are further re-positioned within emerging ‘deep time’ story lines.

### *British Banausicism*

Vocational education historian Stephen Murray Smith argues that there is ‘a banausic quality in technical education which relegates it to second place, despite its direct relevance to our survival as a nation’ (Murray-Smith, 1965: 170). By this he means a pervading societal de-valuing of ‘hand’s based’ manual and trades work and education over ‘mind based’ non-manual and professional work. This is a peculiarly British phenomenon, particularly when compared with countries such as Germany and large parts of the United States which practise greater ‘parity of esteem’ between the two. The term originates from the Ancient Greek ‘banausos’, which refers to the class of manual labourers and artisans. Within classical Greek society manual labourers were a necessary underclass living above the level of slaves but well below that of the Greek citizen elite who lived for reason and leisure (‘arete’) alone. Philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle argued that those who worked with their hands were less likely to preserve the values of the state and were to be treated warily. Banousos was transformed into ‘Banausic’, a pejorative adjective, in mid-nineteenth century Britain, following the revival of classical education and the Industrial Revolution. In many ways it signified the differences between the emerging working

and middle classes, and reflected in the growth of a mass public education system that separated out manual and mental skills training through the creation of vocational and 'high' schools (Hermann et al, 1971: 19-27).

In Australia the banaisic tradition permeates educational discourse through such discussions as the 'education versus training' debate. This is more than implied, for example, in the Martin Report (1964) that was instrumental in creating postcompulsory technical colleges and Colleges of Advanced Education. In arguing for a separation of lower level manual vocational courses from professional programs it suggested that the new colleges' prestige could be further enhanced by 'the physical separation of the students in the recreational and trade courses from those in the general diploma courses...their presence...is inappropriate' (Martin, 1964: 166). On the eve of the VET sector, too, the banaisic tradition was hinted at in the Finn Review on postcompulsory participation of the young in vocational education: 'Both individual and industry needs are leading to a convergence of general and vocational education' (Finn, 1992: ix). The debate continues.

#### *The Australian Constitution and the 1942 Tax Act*

The Australian Constitution makes no provision for education, apart from obscure references to provide benefits to students (Part IV: 51: xxiiiA) and various sections referring to the Commonwealth's powers to provide grants to states. In 1943 Chief Justice Latham, for example, stated in a case testing Commonwealth powers over education: 'The Commonwealth Parliament has no powers to legislate with respect to the subject of education as such' (Tannock, 1973: 170).

So, how then did the federal government win the financial and policy control it now enjoys over the states? In a flash of genius, Prime Minister John Curtin transformed Commonwealth powers overnight by usurping the States' rights to collect income tax (Day, 1999). He did this in response to the early 1940s climate of 'total war' and the need to develop a national industry and defence response to the imminent threat of Japanese invasion. Through the 1942 Tax Act he rapidly transformed Canberra from a rural rump with limited fiscal controls over the states to the totalising powerhouse we know today. Extended from a temporary to a permanent basis in postwar years the Chifley government established the basis for the annual distribution of funds to the states, now known as the Council of Australian Government. It is here that tax revenue is argued for and distributed as grant income, inevitably with policy hamstrings. Through this mechanism the Commonwealth has side-stepped its lack of constitutional responsibility for education and achieved influence through an institutional system of sanctions, bribery and blackmail (Spaull, 1987; Bolton, 1990: 3-58). Without it, current state and federal VET arrangements would not be the same.

#### *Scientific management or Taylorism*

While I have argued in other places for the overwhelming influence of scientific management or Taylorism over contemporary organisational and VET practice (Rushbrook, 2007a; Clemans and Rushbrook, 2011), perhaps not more so than in the creation of Competency Based Training, the essentials are worth repeating. In the first quarter of the Twentieth Century, Scientific Management claimed to develop a 'science of work' through the use of proven empirical data collection methods to break down tasks into their component parts and efficiently and cost-effectively re-design the workplace to achieve greater levels of productivity and profit. Workers

were then matched and trained to perform and consistently repeat these narrowly defined tasks. The most popular representation of Scientific Management was the assembly line, first used on a large scale in Henry Ford's production of the T Model (and the origin of scientific management's other pseudonym, 'Fordism'). While tempered in contemporary industrial practice one may still argue for its continuing influence over workplace practice, even though thinly disguised as lean production or human capital management strategies. A useful historical project would be to critique and map the legacy of Taylorism against the introduction of these practices.

### *The Kangan Report 1974*

Of course contemporary VET would not be the same or even exist without the seminal work of the Kangan Report (Kangan, 1974). His foresight in introducing the concepts of recurrent education and lifelong learning reflects strongly New Millennium approaches to adult and workplace vocational education. It should be remembered, however, that Kangan's particular application of recurrent education and lifelong learning was drawn from the International Labour Organisation and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, which saw them as part of a strategy for closely connecting educational and economic systems in a way that contributed to a more efficient and productive capitalism. In this sense, then, recurrent education and lifelong learning were Trojan horses, serving the interests of self-selected, self-directed non-credentialed adult learning yet containing within them possibilities for the other-directed and formal outcomes-based vocational training technologies we are so familiar with today. It is this turn that Kangan feared: that the needs of industry would take priority over the vocational and educational needs of individuals (Rushbrook, 2010: 53). Perhaps this was the price of his failure in the report to reconcile personal and public advantage in vocational education provision? To debate the mid 1970s intentions of the Kangan Report and its New Millennium outcomes might provide useful fodder for reinventing VET to include the voices of the report's original intended audience – Australian citizens and consumers of vocational education, rather than dominating industry groups and government bureaucrats?

### **Conclusion**

The paper makes four broad points. First, it argues that AVETRA should engage in a deeper and broader process of critical reflection of its research work over the past fourteen years with a view to adopting a more eclectic and independent approach. Second, it suggests that a useful research paradigm to gain insights for this process might be drawn from the discipline of history and in particular its story telling sub-branch of narrative history. Third, it outlines the essentials of narrative history research, including its origins, contemporary iterations and possibilities for linking the past with the future, whether recording the past for its own sake or gleaning insights for improved future practice. Fourth and finally, it suggests starting points for such an investigation through noting four varied areas of VET history that have strongly influenced the sector's current shape: British bananism, the Australian Constitution and the 1942 Tax Act, scientific management or Taylorism and the Kangan Report.

In conclusion, it may be suggested that the approach outlined may yield, according to Lipstadt, 'inconvenient history' (Lipstadt, 2005: 301) (to say nothing of inconvenient truths) or outcomes that challenge current VET ways of doing things through the

revelation of new insights - whether new 'facts', forgotten practices or new questions. This is as it should be.

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