Teachers as active agents in recontextualising pedagogic spaces in vocational education and training

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This paper shows that policy reforms in Vocational Education and Training in Australia since the late 1980s developed with the specific intention of reforming the official pedagogic discourse and associated pedagogic spaces that existed at that time. The discourses of flexible delivery, flexible learning, online learning, e-learning and blended learning established pedagogic spaces that are described in terms of the primary purposes, actors, rules and resources that have characterised each. Drawing on the idea of recontextualisation, an existing model is used as a basis to propose a representation of the dynamics that shape practice in the transition from one pedagogic space to another. This model portrays teachers as active agents in the recontextualisation of official policy discourse. A proposition that challenges the ideas of rational actor theory that underpins assumptions about the implementation of policy changes in VET.

Keywords: pedagogic space, vocational education, teachers, teaching, recontextualisation

Introduction

This paper examines the role of teachers in recontextualising pedagogic spaces within vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. The paper commences with a brief consideration of the emergence of flexible learning, online learning, e-learning and blended learning as defined in national policy documents in the VET sector. Drawing on the work of others it is observed that the change management approach adopted in the implementing these pedagogic spaces was largely predicated on the idea of rational actor theory. That is, if the environment in which teachers operate is altered in a controlled manner, then teachers will respond in a rational and logical manner based on self-interest.

A model, derived from research that investigated the dynamics that shaped VET teachers' practice in the period from 2002 to 2004 when they integrated online technology into their practice is then presented (Robertson, 2006). Given that this model was developed against a policy background of official support for flexible learning, online learning and e-learning, it is proposed that generalisation of the model across these pedagogic spaces is reasonable. The influence and interactions of official and teacher influences on shaping the instructional practices that emerge from official policy are then considered to support the assertion that adopting a rational choice theory approach to changing teachers' practice is problematic.

Pedagogic spaces and the Australian VET system

In its most limited interpretation, pedagogic space is concerned with the physical structure of the teaching and learning space and the idea of micro or sub spaces that can be constructed within a classroom environment. However, as Watkins (2007, p.770) asserts 'Space from a pedagogic perspective needs to be understood in more than simply a phenomenological sense. Although important, such an approach lacks the necessary social dimension'. Di Leo and Jacobs (2004) identify three inter-related modes or dimensions of pedagogic space: physical transformation which relates to place or space; pedagogical transformation which relates to the relations between the place of learning and the human participants; and, institutional or political transformations which relate to the cultural and political aspects of classrooms. They argue that sites of pedagogy are not inherently better or worse than other potential space, value is brought through the social, cultural and political forces that are historically constructed. Each site is unique, local and contingent rather than generalisable (Di Leo & Jacobs, 2004). The current

paper adopts a similar position to these commentators in viewing pedagogic spaces as socially and culturally constructed that become a site of struggle for control.

In VET, officially supported pedagogic spaces are legitimized in policy. Until the mid-1980s vocational education and training in Australia was provided on a State by State basis. The dominant form of teaching and learning was through a 'conventional' face-to-face mode. This was to change with the emergence of competency based training and the notion of flexible delivery. The rapid development and availability of networked technology was to further change policy discourse and the portrayal of pedagogic spaces.

Conventional face-to-face delivery was characterised as largely classroom based with the primary recipient identified as the student. Curriculum was locally developed and typically arranged around knowledge areas rather than work related activities. Whilst these curricula may have been developed in consultation with representatives from local industry, they were ultimately developed by teachers in educational institutions. In some cases curriculum took the form a topic lists and suggested content, in others, in the form of outcomes based statements that had been developed according to behaviorist principles. The term teacher was accepted as identifying the person responsible for teaching and assessment. Typically this individual had several years of experience working in their vocational discipline industry before coming to education. At which time they were required to complete a postgraduate qualification in teacher training.

From 1987, in response to economic crisis, a national approach to vocational education and training, based on co-operative federalism, emerged (Mitchell, Robertson, & Shorten, 1999). A series of reforms known as the National Training Reform Agenda (NTRA) were put into place. Since that time, whilst specific strategies have varied, the primary purpose of VET, as reflected in nationally endorsed strategic plans has remained consistently associated with the provision of a skilled and flexible workforce to enable Australian industry to be competitive in domestic and international markets (Australian National Training Authority, 1994, 1998, 2003).

Competency based training (CBT) became the nationally legitimised approach to curriculum and the 'foundation stone of training reform in Australia' (Smith & Keating, 2003, p.120). Initially, national competency standards were developed by industry and endorsed by the National Training Board (National Training Board Ltd., 1992). These standards were then developed into an outcomes-based curriculum in a modular format against which teachers assessed learner's abilities. There was also central support for the development of print-based learning materials (Bruhn & Guthrie, 1991; Simmons, Harper, & Veitch, 1992). The current manifestation of CBT is in the form of industry developed and nationally endorsed sets of competency standards, assessment guidelines and qualifications known as Training Packages. Where national competency standards had previously been translated into curriculum against which learners were assessed, this new version of CBT required assessment directly against the workplace based national competency standards thus removing any notion of what educationalists would identify as curriculum from the assessment process. The Training Package arrangements further shifted the central focus of VET away from the language of education to the language of the workplace which was promoted as a preferred site of VET provision. They remain the primary guide to what must be assessed.

In 1992, the official definition of flexible delivery focused on 'the adoption of a range of learning strategies in a variety of learning environments to cater for differences in learning styles, learning interests and needs, and variation in learning opportunities' (Flexible Delivery Working Party, 1992, p.5) including the use of technology where appropriate. A revised definition published in 1996 retained the idea of flexibility in the time, place and pace of learning 'based on the skill needs and delivery requirements of clients, not the interests of trainers or providers … it changes the role of trainer from a source of knowledge to a manager of learning and facilitator (Australian National Training Authority, 1996, p.11).

Over time, the place of technology as a preferred approach to teaching and learning was reinforced. In 1998, the second national VET strategic plan identified the need for the vocational sector to establish a 'clear presence in the new online delivery environment [leading to] the development of new world-class training programs and learning experiences available online' (Australian National Training Authority, 1998, p.1). In 2000, the goal was to be recognised as a global leader in applying new technologies to vocational education and training (Australian National Training Authority, 2001).

To facilitate the implementation of CBT, and flexible delivery, particularly in the workplace environment, the notion of the workplace trainer emerged. The requirement for VET teachers/trainers to have

completed a university level qualification in teaching disappeared to be replaced by the lower level Category 2 Workplace Trainer, then the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, and subsequently the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (Smith & Keating, 2003).

In addition to these changes, rules associated with competition, diversity and funding altered with the establishment of the training market (Angus, 1997; Smith & Keating, 2003). Policy aimed to increase the number of private providers who could compete with the existing public TAFE providers so that funding was no longer guaranteed. Funding levels were progressively cut to encourage providers to be less reliant on government funding and to engage in commercial activities (Billett et al., 1999; Smith & Keating, 2003).

In 1999, the term flexible delivery was replaced with flexible learning which re-iterated the intention to expand the choice of what, when, where and how people learn, including e-learning (Backroad Connections Pty Ltd, 2003). This change was attributed to a shift from instrumental to constructivist pedagogies (Backroad Connections Pty Ltd, 2003). The language of online learning emerged in policy by 2000 and was quickly replaced by e-learning (Australian National Training Authority, 2001; EdNA VET Advisory Group, 2001).

Flexible learning became an umbrella term that included e-learning. Online learning was a sub-set of e-learning. Where online learning was limited to networked technologies (internet, intranet, extranet), e-learning included a broader range of electronic media including computer-based learning, web-based learning and virtual classrooms (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2002). Blended learning became as a mix of modes of learning including the use of technology both on- and off-campus (Backroad Connections Pty Ltd, 2003; Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2002). The most recent four year plan for the Australian Flexible Learning Framework reasserts the focus on 'making e-learning an integral part of the national training system' (Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2007, p.5).

These changes in policy were not accidental they represented an intentional shift in the nature of pedagogic space that had previously characterised VET. For example, the change in language to represent the primary recipient of VET from student, to learner and client reflects a particular social construction of who has access to the privileges of participation in the VET system. These changes represent a way to insulate the reforming VET system from the notions of the student which finds its origins in education departments, and concern for a mix of liberal and work education which characterised the early vocational education and training system (Rushbrook, 1995). The term client is more consistent with the promotion of the training market which aimed to diversify training provision, increase competition and reduce training provider reliance on government funding. The change from a language of teacher to trainer challenged the 'traditions, strategies, norms, assumptions and pedagogies historically constituting teacher-practitioner culture' (Rushbrook, 1997, p.100). Together with other changes these represented a challenge to the liberal education discourses which had constructed a particular institutional identity (Chappell, 1998).

To summarise, the cultural norms, rules and regulations governing VET changed dramatically with the emergence of CBT and flexible delivery. The provision of vocational education changed from a State and locally based endeavor to one of a nationally coordinated approach. Teachers were required to teach and assess against nationally endorsed outcomes. The cultural norm as portrayed in policy represented a significant shift away from the existing idea of liberal education and towards the idea of training for the workplace. Flexible delivery and flexible learning as it incorporates online learning, e-learning and blended learning are 'learner centered and client focused', they expand the 'choice of what, when, where and how people learn' (Australian National Training Authority, 1996). These represent changes in officially legitimized pedagogic spaces as portrayed in VET policy.

Rational actor theory and recontextualisation

In considering the institutional redesign of the emerging VET sector Seddon and Angus (1998, p.3) assert that 'contemporary reformist governments have taken up this promise of institutional redesign, informed by rational actor theory' which they describe as 'hyperrational'.

> Building on the assumptions of rational actor theory, it is argued that if contextual settings shape behaviour, then changing contextual settings will change behaviour. Further, if preferred behavioural outcomes can be defined, the contextual changes which produce these outcomes can be sought. (Seddon & Angus, 1998, p.2)

The limitations of this approach are the assumptions that all action is based on self-interest, utilitarianism and instrumentalism rather than more complex motivations. That the importance of socio-cultural heritage is ignored and that all behaviour is seen as predictable rather than differentiated with the possibility of unintended consequences (Seddon & Angus, 1998). Rational actor theory discounts the importance of human agency. Rather, institutional design is a complex process that is characterised by contestation and struggle for control over the legitimisation of institutional (in this case VET) norms. Social and political theories are required in understanding institutional life and the effects of institutional reforms. It is here that Basil Bernstein's work, particularly his notion of recontextualisation provides a way to examine the issues of power and control and the contest for legitimisation that occurs in institutions. Recontextualisation rules regulate the formation of specific pedagogic discourse to construct the thinkable, official knowledge and the 'what' and 'how' of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000).

Recontextualisation is influenced by two fields. Through the official recontextualising field (ORF) the state and its delegates operate at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse. This undergoes further recontextualisation through the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) when policy is interpreted and implemented by those who are directly involved in teaching. Whilst the state and its agencies legitimise the principles of distribution of social power and control which are incorporated into the official pedagogic discourse these principles undergo further recontextualisation at the level of the educator. In the case of traditional classroom based teaching, agents of the pedagogic recontextualising field include teachers and authors of resources that are used by students.

Building on the work of Robertson (2006), the next section of this paper presents a model representing the dynamics that shape VET teaching when specific instructional practices emerge from a pedagogic pool that is legitimised by the official pedagogic discourse. The model was developed in the context of vocational teachers integrating online technology into their practice between 2002 and 2004 when flexible learning, online learning and e-learning were being officially promoted by VET policy. The model demonstrates the complexity of the dynamics and the struggle for control over the pedagogic spaces that occurs in institutions and at an individual level in a context of change. This complexity renders the rational actor theory approach adopted by governments in promoting these pedagogic spaces as problematic.

Modelling the dynamics that shape teachers' practice

At the macro level, Figure 1 contains four elements: the outer sphere of official influences; the inner sphere of teacher influences; the broken line between the outer and inner spheres which represents the transactional nature of the official and teacher influences; and the curved arrows that represent the dynamic nature of the relationship between the two fields.

The outer sphere of official influences is informed by Bernstein's official recontextualising field. The official influences that affect teaching practice include national, regional and organisational policy; organisational support; external agencies; curriculum; and the characteristics of endorsed software. Agents in this field legitimise a pool of pedagogic possibilities that are consistent with and will reproduce the ideology supported by the official field. With the exception of radical teachers who practice beyond the scope of officially legitimised pedagogic possibilities, teachers' specific instructional practices will be consistent with the legitimised pool of pedagogic possibilities.

The inner sphere of the model, teacher influences, is informed by Bernstein's pedagogic recontextualising field, and represents how, faced with the same policy imperatives, teachers practice is shaped. The model proposes that teachers come to their practice with an established and implicit set of preferred teaching principles. These are informed by a variety of constructs such as values, beliefs, personal and practical theories, and, teacher identity that provide the basis for what teachers do and how they do it (Errington, 2001; Lasky, 2005; Marland, 1997, 1998). Mediated through a 'lens of disposition' teachers' preferred teaching principles are operationalised into specific instructional practices by a range of strategies. In the case of the integration of online technology there is variation in the specific online functionalities adopted, application of online technology to teaching and/or assessment, and the level of integration of online technology into practice (Robertson, 2006). The current paper proposes that, in the case of considering practice in differing pedagogic spaces, these strategies can be generalised so that they relate to the selection of some specific instructional strategies and the rejection of others; the selective application of specific instructional strategies to teaching and/or assessment; and variation in the degree to which specific instructional strategies are integrated into practice.
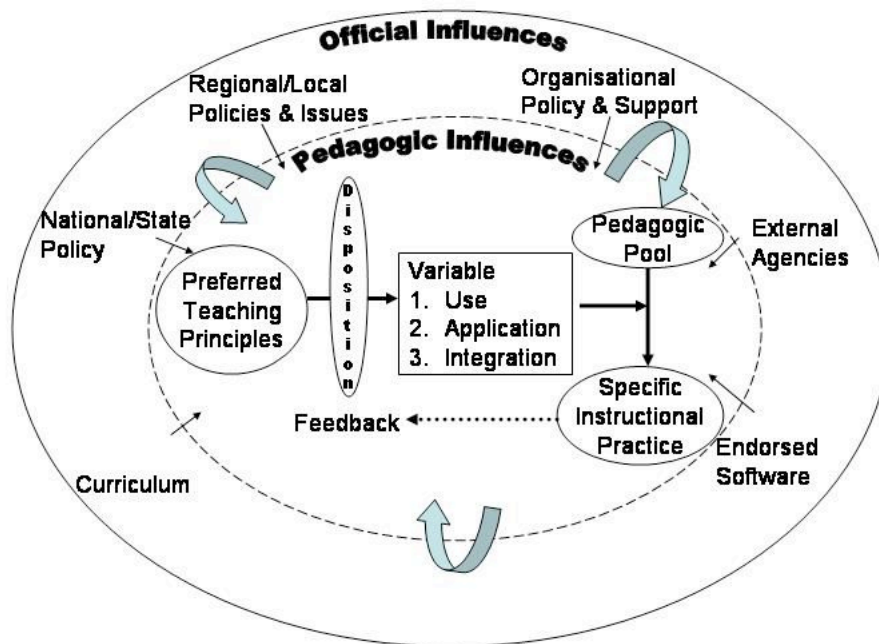
Figure 1: The dynamics of official and teacher influences (Robertson, 2006, p.177)

The model accommodates the proposal that once established, an individual's values and beliefs about what constitutes good teaching practice is unlikely to change and is a significant influence on how teachers practice (Errington, 2001, 2004; Marland, 1997, 1998; Pajares, 1992). However, observation of teaching activity suggests that the specific practices do change over time. It is proposed that this change is mediated through the 'lens of disposition'. For example, where a teacher uses a specific instructional practice, feedback from the experience will maintain, strengthen or weaken the level of disposition towards the use of that practice in the future. Thus whilst, preferred teaching practices may not fundamentally change, the specific instructional practices that manifest may alter as teachers become more or less confident and more or less disposed to the use of those practices.

The model proposes that teachers' pedagogic influences operate against a background of official influences which legitimise a pedagogic pool from which specific instructional practices are drawn. The level of teacher autonomy is dependent on the balance of influence of the official and teacher fields. Where official influence overwhelms teacher influence through agencies such as restrictive curriculum, standardised testing and the use of centrally developed resources there is limited autonomy. In this case, the teacher experiences tight restriction in their discretion in shaping the specific instructional practices that are implemented. Where official influences do not overwhelm teacher influence there is a greater level of autonomy and choice of specific instructional practices which may either be consistent or inconsistent with the expected outcomes of official policy. Teachers' behaviour is informed by intrinsic factors such as personal beliefs, image of self, role and identity are of critical importance (Day, Elliot, & Kingston, 2005) and extrinsic factors including social, cultural and political influences (Lasky, 2005). In the absence of overwhelming official influences, teachers are active agents in the shaping of the teaching and learning interactions that emerge That is, teachers' practice cannot be entirely predicted through rational-logical means.

Conclusion

As Apple (1996, p.22) asserts, education is not a neutral activity but one that is 'produced out of the cultural, political, and economic conflicts, tensions, and compromises that organise and disorganise a people'. The pedagogic spaces, discussed in this paper are representative of the institution of VET education that supports a 'particular moral disposition, motivation and aspiration, embedded in particular performance and practices [where] curriculum reform emerges out of a struggle between groups to make their bias (and focus) state policy and practice' (Bernstein, 1999, p.246).

It has been shown that policy reforms in VET in Australia since the late 1980s developed with the specific intention of reforming the official pedagogic discourse and associated pedagogic spaces that existed at that time. The discourses of flexible delivery, flexible learning, online learning, e-learning and

blended learning established pedagogic spaces that have been described in terms of the primary purposes, actors, rules and resources that have characterised each. A model that represents the dynamics that shape teachers' practice when they integrate online technology is used as a basis to portray the transition from one pedagogic space to another. This model depicts teachers as active agents in the recontextualisation of officially sanctioned pedagogic spaces, it supports those who challenge rational actor theory as an approach that is likely to result in predictable changes in teachers' practice in the face of policy reform in VET.

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