Teaching and learning needs: Moving between practice & policy in VET

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This paper analyses educational forces in TAFE in relation to curriculum issues linked to wider social and cultural contexts arising from an ANTA-funded project into the teaching and learning needs of special interest groups. In particular. this paper attempts to explain the educational processes in TAFE and motivations for changing teaching and learning strategies to more effectively meet the needs of special groups. The aim is to present a synthesis of student and teacher perspectives that provides a basis for moving between practice and policy in VET.

In our tender to the ANTA Research Advisory Council, the project team outlined a number of strategies to be adopted in order to achieve its aim to identify the teaching and learning needs of special interest groups. One objective was to assist in the formulation of strategies for further development of appropriate curriculum for VET in Australia in a way that assisted closer alignment between teaching practice and preferred learning styles. The course areas studied were Carpentry' and Joinery, Child Care, Tourism and Hospitality. and Business Studies.

Research background

The research was asked to focus on the extent of the relationship, if any, between teaching and learning within VET related to age and socioeconomic status factors. The methodology', enabled the team to seek insights into the impact of these variables upon preferred learning styles as well as into their impact on student responses to a variety of pedagogical practices.

The project followed a multi-method approach which sought depth and breadth of data sources in order to construct, through participant-document-investigator triangulation, as full a picture as possible within the limitations and constraints of the project. Due to site limitations, formal and informal interviews were the dominant research techniques though document collection and observation provided data for validity checks ~ hen analysing the interviews.

Through this approach the team sought to ascertain the level of congruence between curriculum intentions and students' experience within and across four different VET areas. It also aimed to provide an illustration of the extent to which reforming curriculum design was favoured 'in-house' and/or deemed necessary.

This comparative analysis followed a number of phases. The project began by establishing a platform for the project and a clarification 0.' definitions, concepts and research intentions. Phase 2 included an evaluation of the teaching learning processes. Phase 3 involved a series of site-visits and a series of focus group interviews with urban and rural participants. Phase 4 was a concentration of data and analysis into the final report under the guidance of an advisory committee.

The purpose of a comparative analysis of the teaching-learning needs of special groups was to identify weaknesses to be remedied, to identity strengths and achievements which might be disseminated to others, and to facilitate the formulation of strategies for further development. This was an interactive process, however, these concepts are problematic and are not objective entities which exist outside the act of participation in TAFE and the project itself.

Therefore, this research did not set out to find a universal truth or 'one best way' conclusion but, rather, to elicit a position of agreement as to the purposes of the teaching and learning in TAFE and how to make sense of what is being achieved as the basis for further purposive action based on informed consensus, democratic principles and ethical considerations. The aims of the project

were to document the social characteristics of students in selected VET area, especially the patterns of aged and socioeconomic status; to study their learning experiences and needs, and to investigate the suitability of the styles of teaching made available to them.

Since the project required the use of both system data and close-focus fieldwork, it needed to be centred on one system (given the scale of funding). NSW TAFE has a data base on over 400,000 students that is able to extract a social profile and course profile for each of the four student course groups. Therefore, we selected NSW TAFE, with a contrasting set of data collected in Victoria to diversify the data and to check the applicability of the findings to another system/state.

With the foci of the study set by ANTA as the differences of age and socioeconomic status, we defined this as including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, immigrant groups, people living in rural areas, unemployed people or people with low literacy levels. The student-college profiles were developed from statistics collected at enrolment b\ NSW TAFE. Initially, we asked for a profile on TAFE enrolments data for the industry groups noted above, the profile to include: employment status, age, gender, Aboriginality, language spoken at home, disability, country of birth and residence (urban/rural/isolated).

The project recognised the importance of the multi-site nature of the VET sector and attempted to respond to the complexity of the project's intentions and practices given the diversity of urban and rural research contexts. Unfortunately, we were not able to look at workplace learning. The task set for us had the potential for finding different outcomes for each setting because, by definition, we were researching identifiable differences that enabled site selection. However, the research process enabled us to estimate to what extent the different TAFE site profiles were statistically relevant but in practice mainly superficial.

The protocol established by the project team was that letters of introduction relating to each Institute-College-Course were developed through the NSW TAFE team and disseminated through the University of Sydney team. This protocol was intended to recognise the levels of management responsibility from the Centre down and to ensure that site-level visits were foreshadowed in a way that would allow efficient and friendly contact.

Interviews were conducted to develop background data and understandings of the project as well as a source for quotation. Each set of more than 150 responses was recorded through TAFE-recording (when permitted) and fieldnotes were made, where required, copying down direct quotations and observations and asking the interviewee to confirm accuracy. The team took care to approach each interview with sensitivity to the participant's position and to controversial aspects of some of the topics covered.

Curriculum

In reporting on a case study of teaching-learning practices in TAFE, this paper is concerned with practical aspects of the curriculum based on interview data with TAFE teachers and students, especially those students perceived to have special needs. Institutions such as TAFE, and the cultures of those institutions, clearly express social relations that are marked by cause and effect (Crump, 1992). Change is investigated in this paper in the context of systemic changes as well as changes at college and/or course level.

This paper presents a view that knowledge, and changes in what counts as 'validated knowledge', comes from seeking solutions to practical problems. This process is marked by changes in the learner and teacher that provide scope for other types of change. The problem for TAFE is its historic function of transmission of essentially industry 'validated knowledge.

If this interpretation of the historic function of TAFE is accepted, the question becomes 'Does curriculum in TAFE change what counts as valid knowledge or at best generate new pedagogic forms?'. The answer to this question rests with equitable and effective local level participation in curriculum development and practice. The jargon we applied to this is 'co-production'.

Curriculum studies began, according to Pinar and Grumet (1981, 20), in Denver in the 1920s when a teacher was hired by the local district superintendent to oversee the curriculum (as discrete

subjects) in specific schools and across an administrative district. Eighty years later there are still misunderstandings about processes of curriculum development and practice. Narrow definitions of 'curriculum' contain a list of subjects while broader definitions contain just about everything that happens in a course or class including teaching methods, purposes, classroom organisation and subject/course content. The history of curriculum development has thus been a history of shifting descriptions and analyses of what a curriculum might be.

This diversity has significant implications for research which intends to focus on processes of curriculum formation and change in TAFE. We hypothesised that it was quite likely that there would be an intriguing diversity of views within and between the courses that became our case studies, due in part to the changes in curriculum thinking and practices occurring in the VET sector in the 1990s as well as to the diversity of professional and workplace backgrounds of the teaching staff and to their current teaching location. We predicted also similar uncertainty about terms 'curriculum decision-making' and 'curriculum autonomy.

Our view was that the context, power relations and group interests surrounding the development of each course encloses definitions within varying perspectives making it most unlikely that there could be agreement on one definition of 'curriculum'. It was important that we attempted to establish what descriptions of 'curriculum' were implied in college/course documents allied to what participants told us through interviewing. This was not an easy task.

We predicted that what might be needed for a more coherent description of curricular processes in TAFE contexts is an understanding about the close relationship between teacher-student practices and curriculum practices. This point was taken further through a cultural approach which sought and analysed the influence of complex variables, such as ethnicity, gender, social class and age, on the problem and solution repertoires of teacher and student cultures in mixed socioeconomic urban and rural TAFE colleges.

This analysis implied that the construction of the curriculum rested on the interpersonal understanding between teachers and students if the curriculum is to be practically effective, an understanding which becomes the basis for practical curricular coherence. Our view was that curriculum is constructed in practice out of the knowledge and experience of those who participate in the educational process.

Teaching & learning

Teaching and Learning processes are complex and varied. Our analysis of teaching practice reflected attempts to make curriculum relevant to the varying needs and interests of learners in a way that affirms the public purpose of TAFE. However, within any one course, classroom or even educational site, the extent of these accommodations were significantly different.

Core learning processes, as defined by Malcolm Skilbeck in 1980, involve learning and thinking techniques, ways of organising knowledge, dispositions and values, skills or abilities, forms of expression, workshops and practical performance, as well as interpersonal and groups relationships. These processes were linked by Skilbeck to a 'core curriculum' which is remarkable for its similarities to the Mayer Key Competencies of the 1990s. This account of core learning processes was - and remains - a challenge to the traditional conceptualisation of teaching and learning as a teacher focused activity centred on a body of knowledge involving a passive "demonstration" of what is to be learnt in order to be assessed.

Teacher-directed strategies have been the dominant pedagogy in TAFE as elsewhere because of the privileged professional position of teachers as well as the continuing tight correlation between teaching method and classroom control. Strategies such as rote learning, drill, lecture/exposition, demonstration and note-taking are all based on a theory of knowledge that we see as problematic and contestable. Yet these teaching practices continue to be seen as effective because they structure learning in a way that drives readily identifiable "results". One teacher told us:

> Examinations provide a reference to each student's level of ability. I use exam results as a confirmation on teaching feedback but I a/so take into account factors that 'night have affected outcomes. [Urban. Dis., OAFS, Female, FT casual, Teacher]

Even when teaching and learning shifts into simulation, structured group work, guided discovery, cooperative group learning and interest-based research, the authority for what counts as knowledge is validated by the teacher; a process confirmed by the assessment of individual performance. One teacher told us:

> You 've got to buy enough time in the syllabus to be able to do other things that relate to them because you've got to make time to find out how they're doing, whether they're looking to get a job, what they want to do. You get into their heads and find out what they wan!. [Urban Dis., C&J, Male, FT teacher]

More recently, notions of flexible delivery, team-based learning, problem-based learning and structured reflection, have pushed the teaching-learning process into a reciprocal exchange between knower and learner in a way that has the potential to better meet the needs and interests of all participants:

> We use a lot of disco very learning with tile guys, just letting them take on a project and they'll come up with the problems and solve their own problems. [Rural, C&J, male FT teacher]

Very recent developments in hypertext links and Internet resources have shifted the pendulum almost across to the antithesis of traditional methods in that the teacher has little intellectual authority, may not be present, cannot possibly match the knowledge base available and is not in the same position to assess performance. Yet much multi-media material remains a task-oriented tutorial and has not exploited this shift.

The shift noted above is a consequence of the shift from a content to a process view of curriculum. A process view is oriented toward the need of an employment-career level, has a technical knowledge base concerned with how to control or influence 'content' and is an orientation that becomes more essential following the increased learning and employment status of individuals.

What this makes clear is that epistemological procedures can lead directly to curricular policies which openly challenge the "spectator theory' of knowledge by making the knower an actor: someone who discusses, moves about, experiments and so on according to their levels of experience, perceptions of relevance and preferred learning styles. From our perspective, this is especially important when considering teaching-learning processes for poor, minority and otherwise vulnerable young people.

Policy

TAFE policies on teaching are dealt with at one level in NSW through the TAFE Commission Gazette issued under the authority of the NSW Minister for Education and Training. These policies include support for competency-based assessment, for example. Further details are available in booklets such as "TAFE NSW: How it works" (1995) and, of course, through specific course curriculum documents. This is what is known as 'desktop policy':

> I get a very basic curriculum outline, a few lines per lesson, 'with outcomes to refer to, but have great flexibility to develop curriculum. I need to stick to what's there [hi the document because of accountability but have total independence regarding the 'ways I teach'. There is trust in my professional judgment. [Urban Dis., CCS, Female PT teacher]

However, this teachers' students viewed this experience another way. One student expressed the impact of 'hidden policy' in the curriculum:

> There is a set curriculum and we have no say in the content and how we are taught. Sometimes we are asked what we would like to be taught but for that subject [Personal Skills]8 hours] we already knew it! [Urban, Dis., CCS, Female, 21 years]

Overall, TAFE teachers' classroom practices are shaped by a range of TAFE policy production. At present, competency-based training and assessment have a high profile and we asked questions about this to all interviewees.

Other influences stem from interaction with "quality" practices which seek, in part, to improve the information provided to students about coursework and completion requirements. The Australian Standards Framework and the Australian Qualifications Framework also play a significant part in shaping classroom practices through legislated policy.

The syllabus format in TAFE sets out course outcomes, module purposes and learning outcomes and also contain assessment criteria, learning and assessment, assessment methods, assessment strategies and resources and activities. One teacher saw the syllabus as operating in the following way:

> Our syllabus is laid out as a step-by-step demonstration-practical-demonstration cycle. When they achieve this we move on to the next lot. Some recipes are very old and need to be changed and there have been changes to practical hours (cut from 6 to 5) but the content has not been adjusted. [Urban, Dis, CC3, Male FT teacher]

There is a dysfunction here between policy text and policy practice. In a competency-based training and assessment framework, the intention of different teaching and learning strategies is that they be 'learner-driven' and provide scope for more flexibility to meet preferred learning styles than when teaching remains teacher-driven. In one situation [Urban Dis. CC3J the course dropped grading for a new pass/fail scheme but reintroduced grades to enable judgments to be made for the annual awards and prize night! This is a classic example of recontextualisation of policy.

There is also a policy intention to open up access to learning in a way that should enhance equality of outcomes for special needs groups through providing recognition of prior learning, catering for differences in students' learning styles, increasing student choice of course content, varying time and place of learning, providing flexible entry and exit points, and increasing flexibility of assessment.

TAFE has been wise to focus on teaching methods to improve the quality of teaching and learning rather than ask teachers to take on the responsibility of at tempting to identify vaguely defined individual differences on the basis of incomplete research and incoherent theoretical concepts. The latter is dangerous ground especially when seeking to assist people already with special educational needs. But there remains a gap between macro-meso-micro policy which Will not be fully bridged without a better understanding and application of policy processes.

Findings

While it is accepted that education plays a crucial role in both offering opportunities for individual social mobility and yet legitimates large-scale socioeconomic inequality, the match between teaching-learning processes and the needs of special groups has not been realised in a systemic manner for education and training in Australia.

One rationale for TAFE is that investing in individual skill development will provide a sound pool of workers who, however self-fulfilled (or not), ultimately sense the economic needs of the state and corporations as human capital. The history of TAFE has been one of individual advancement through status and income - historically for the "working class" - but we needed to ask to what extent the intended outcome of recent curriculum reforms remained enhanced economic production rather than pedagogical efficacy and personal and group achievement.

Ultimately, then, a close match between teaching and learning and the needs of special groups has the potential to address issues of social justice and equity in a profound and essentially more democratic context. The changing relations between curriculum and pedagogy that can emerge from what has been described above has entailed a redefinition of what students and teachers consider valid and valuable knowledge.

We concluded that this should have a positive impact on the nature of teaching and learning interactions when these are based on a dual experience of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; an experience engendered through recognition of the needs of special groups, negotiation of the curriculum and the practice of appropriate pedagogy. Cultural perspectives, socioeconomic status, age, gender, class and race shape student responses to various teaching methods that help one define the preferred learning styles of special needs groups so that learning takes on a whole rather than divided meaning for participants.

We argue that, in TAFE, the keys to employing preferred learning styles are social class and culture as this framework allows for an analysis that groups together people from different socioeconomic variables as indeed groups are found in many TAFE courses. It was difficult to judge to what extent the identification of the more academic courses [Office Administration and Financial Skills and Commercial Cookery] as essentially lower middle class, and the other courses [Carpentry and Joinery and Child Care Studies] as working class, was a reflection of the social divisions and occupational hierarchies related to employment expectations in local communities rather than that of the course participant - or, whether the relationship was between class and location of the TAFE college rather than between student and course.

There is also the problem of promoting desirable change in students' perspectives (possibly solved by addressing the perceived and real problems of students in a way that is compatible with the responsibilities and problems of teachers). This can be assisted by a coherent curriculum reflecting genuine elements of co-production. As such, there is a need to build upon the knowledge embedded in each perspective (teacher or student). It is an assumption of a coherent curriculum that knowledge is distributed across cultures.

The trick is to locate the points where different cultural knowledge converge for building a coherent curriculum. This should help build a curriculum which incorporates what teachers can learn about the special needs and problems of their students. In developing co-production, teachers need to understand just how a student's repertoire of learning styles function in practice and how a student generates particular strategies to learn.

Conclusions

This project sought to review, assess and revise concepts and practices related to curriculum in a TAFE context. Our formal, and informal field testing has revealed complex, dynamic, iterative and profoundly challenging educational settings in TAFE colleges and courses. One of the most difficult tasks facing TAFE curriculum renewal will be getting students to ask the right questions about their own learning. Teacher interventions need to be focused on the needs of individuals and groups and to adjust assessment and reporting procedures to establish personal success as well as measure potential workplace performance.

While TAFE students are reasonably satisfied with their educational experience, there are gaps and inconsistencies in curriculum practice that suggest a closer relationship between teachers and students in coursework decision-making should reduce tensions between skills/training and learning. Outcomes/competency-based practices were valued and supported by teachers and students but proffered limited experiences of a more general and cultural importance. Students' formal and informal knowledge remains one of the primary interaction sets in a classroom and exist outside notions of human capital in TAFE.

Whether teachers and students do make real decisions about the content CC curricula was at the core of our investigation into preferred learning styles. The focus of this question during the project turned to whether teachers and students should make this type of decision. A teacher's professional development can be strongly promoted through shared decision on-making in TAFE as curriculum decisions make possible an integration of theory' and practice:, that can change the conduct of teachers and students towards a more conscious and self-critical curriculum planning

TAFE teachers, despite experience in an educational system committed ~ change, feel that the role of the teacher is as a modifier or adaptor of curricula developed by experts' rather than an initiator role. The existence of these teacher cultures in TAFE held significant implications for the problem-solving practices observed, recorded and analysed and gave -- certain imprimaturs

to the processes of curriculum formation and change. These processes help explain the differences identified between 'horizon' and 'headline' policy.

Reform might merely serve to enhance teacher control over curriculum ~lection at the further expense of their students. It might also shift the blame for social problem even more directly onto individual colleges, and individuals within courses, rather than be ~ as problems of the total system or of society as a whole. In any case, curriculum development never occurs in isolation but gathers in other aspects and issues in its development and implementation.

We have argued that curricular diversity, in its relation to participation. Equity and quality is a basic touchstone value for TAFE to extend. The need is for the education profession to be able to take a lead in working with students to construct the options which are relevant to their purposes within the constraints of equity and the common good.

There are logical and coherent factors at work in curriculum in TAFE that can enhance communication and learning. These factors should reflect the learning of students and teachers in a way that is fundamentally connected to the learning of the organisation in which they work and study. In this context, the reconstruction of teachers' work in TAFE- need not express conditions of intensification and disempowerment.

While structural factors will continue to dominate curriculum work i~ TAFE, emphasising difference, the contingent and the local offers a sound and powerful means for moving policy from the centre, through institutes and colleges, into courses and classrooms. In this way, the culture of teachers' work can change towards increased autonomy and progressive pedagogy rather than towards stress, demotivation and alienation.

An educational system which, within the constraints we have set, support the purposes and problem solving of teachers and students in general is a system which provides relevant options, including a propensity towards educational diversity, exploration experimentation and achievement. We feel that our data suggests that TAFE is heading in the right direction with curriculum but in a way that is not sufficiently yet coordinated or communicated.

Finally, an educational system which supports the particular purposes and problem solving of particular sets of students (as defined by their purposes, problems and constraint structures) is a system which provides option sets relevant to their purposes, problem solving and constraint structures. This is especially important for special needs groups. This is sufficient justification for changing policy outcomes in teaching and learning in TAFE.

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