

# What about knowledge?

## The deskilling of teachers

DR LEESA WHEELAHAN addressed the National TAFE AGM in Sydney in January. In this article she presents us with two key arguments.

The first is that access to theoretical, disciplinary knowledge is an issue of distributional justice.

The second is that the displacement of theoretical knowledge from training packages in VET reinforces the second-class status of VET and contributes to deprofessionalising and deskilling teachers' work.

ACCESS to theoretical knowledge is important because it provides access to society's conversation about itself. This conversation includes debates about how society should respond to perceived threats such as global warming, but also debates about society's values, norms and mores, and questions such as whether the previous Howard government was right in denying access to refugees aboard the Tampa. This is why Basil Bernstein (2000), who was an important sociologist of education from the 1970s to the end of the century, argued that access to theoretical, abstract knowledge is a precondition for an effective democracy. He argued that this is because theoretical knowledge is the means that society uses to think the 'unthinkable', the 'not-yet-thought' and to think alternative futures. This is why theoretical knowledge is socially powerful knowledge.

All Australians need access to theoretical, abstract knowledge. By this I don't mean that they should all understand the complexities of physics or English literature. Rather, they need access to 'disciplinarity' or disciplinary styles of reasoning so that they understand how knowledge is used and the broad criteria that need to be applied in evaluating the validity of arguments. A good example of this was the Toowoomba water referendum in 2006. At that time, the dam levels were 18% and residents were asked if the city should recycle its water. The city voted no by about 60% to 40% in favour. In the lead up to the referendum the media interviewed many residents and a common reason given by those who were going to vote against the proposal was that they didn't trust the science. Some insights into the scientific method in broad terms would have helped residents to make informed judgements.

The increasing complexity of knowledge, technology, work and society also means that the knowledge demands of most occupations is increasing. Michael Young (2006: 115), who is another key sociologist of education, argues that while all jobs require context-specific knowledge, "many jobs also require knowledge involving theoretical ideas shared by a community of specialists" located within the disciplines. Workers need to be able to use theoretical knowledge in different ways and in different contexts as their work grows in complexity and difficulty. This means that occupational progression is strongly related

to educational progression, because education is the main way in which most people are provided with access to theoretical, disciplinary knowledge. Consequently, all qualifications should provide students with the disciplinary knowledge they need to study at a higher level within their field in addition to immediate occupational outcomes. VET qualifications would look quite different if they did so, in contrast to their current exclusive focus on workplace-specific outcomes.

Theoretical knowledge differs from everyday knowledge because each is embedded in a different system of meaning. Theoretical knowledge is general *principled* knowledge, and each of the academic disciplines has a specialised language and strong boundaries that insulates it from other disciplines. Students need access to the disciplinary system of meaning as a condition for using knowledge in contextually specific applications. For example, students need access to maths as a condition for *understanding* and applying particular formulas, and if they are to use these formulas in different contexts. In contrast, everyday knowledge is *particularised* knowledge, because its selection and usefulness is determined by the extent to which it is relevant in a particular context. This is the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace.

Vocational curriculum consequently needs to provide students with access to both types of knowledge – to the theoretical knowledge that underpins vocational practice within a field, and to the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace. Trying to collapse the distinction between each type of knowledge does violence to both. It also means that the distinction between TAFE as an educational institution and the workplace as a site of learning is important. An exclusive focus on learning in the workplace denies students access to disciplinary systems of meaning, because, generally speaking, students have access only to contextually specific applications of theoretical knowledge in the workplace, and not to the system of meaning in which theoretical knowledge is embedded. Similarly, an exclusive focus on learning theoretical knowledge in TAFE does not provide students with access to the tacit, context-dependent knowledge of the workplace. *Both* sites of learning are needed.

The need to 'face both ways' in curriculum so that it orients to disciplinary knowledge on

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the one hand, and the workplace on the other, present far more demands on VET teachers than those teaching single academic disciplines (Barnett 2006). Academic curriculum differs from vocational curriculum because academic curriculum faces only one way, as its purpose is to induct students into a disciplinary field of knowledge. In contrast, in vocational curriculum the purpose is to induct students into a field of practice and the theoretical knowledge that underpins practice as the basis for integrating and synthesising each. Vocational curriculum shares this feature with curriculum for the professions. Both academic and vocational teachers need to ensure that curriculum provides students with the capacity to *recognise* different types of knowledge so that they can, for example, distinguish between physics and chemistry or sociology and micro-economics. It is essential that these boundaries are rendered visible so that students can recognise and *use* knowledge appropriately.

Training packages do not make the boundaries between theoretical and everyday knowledge clear, and nor do they make the boundaries between different types of theoretical knowledge clear. This is because they face only one way, to the workplace. This is at the heart of deskilling teachers' work and reinforces VET qualifications as second class compared to academic qualifications.

Training package supporters argue that training packages merely specify the outcomes of learning and not curriculum. However, all teachers know that the outcomes determine what is learnt because assessment drives learning, and the point of training packages was to change the what and how of learning so that VET outcomes were more tightly tied to the workplace. The 'rules' surrounding training packages and units of competence are that while knowledge must be included, it should be in context, and should "only be included if it refers to knowledge actually applied at work" (DEST 2006: 114). Performance criteria include "the primary context and source of knowledge and the skills that need to be applied" (DEST 2006: 139).

In tying knowledge to workplace performances or roles, training packages provide students only with contextually specific applications of disciplinary knowledge. They don't provide students with the capacity to recognise and navigate different kinds of knowledge. Students



need access to disciplinary knowledge because this is the means through which debates are conducted *within* their field of practice, but it is also the means through which students can participate in society's conversation more broadly. Revalorising the depth and complexity of vocational knowledge in VET qualifications would increase the status of VET qualifications by making complex, theoretical knowledge as important in VET as it is in the elite professions. Restoring the centrality of knowledge will contribute to VET teachers' professional practice, because VET teachers will be able to draw on the complex knowledge that underpins practice in their field.

## References

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Dr Leesa Wheelahan  
School of Education &  
Professional Studies  
Griffith University

