

Expertise in teaching adults: A resource for innovation ?



‘The market orientated VET contestability agenda increasingly entails a restricted professionalism that undercuts teaching expertise and its occupational anchoring.’

Professor Terri Seddon

THERE is a curious paradox in Australian education policy. A new government talks up innovation and an education revolution in response to global economic pressures, climate change and fall out from social exclusion and inequality. On the other hand it seeks to implement policies that extend contestability and market reforms in VET. These policy directions have existed with and contributed to skills shortages and innovation constraints in Australia, rather than ameliorating their impacts.

These policy directions will drive capability development in VET; but can a workforce with the capacity to sustain innovation and social inclusion be developed in a context of price competition? While anything may be possible, there is research evidence to suggest this policy paradox could have contradictory outcomes. I flag these concerns by revisiting teaching expertise and how it is managed in VET.

VET capability rests on teaching expertise

The core business of VET is supporting adult learning. This work is underpinned by the organisation of teaching expertise to enable social participation with a special focus on learning connected to employment. It is tailored to adults of all ages, in different geographic contexts with a diversity of aspirations and needs. While learning for work is a prominent aspect of teaching in VET, supporting adult learning also realises broader outcomes. Adult learning develops social skills, personal confidence, capacities to question, as well as abilities that enable learners to communicate, engage with others, organise themselves, participate in decision-making, and exercise power responsibly in

continued on page 14

continued from page 13

their everyday lives.

Teaching expertise is the capacity to direct and enable discovery by learners in ways that realise complex relational outcomes. Teaching goes beyond 'delivery' of externally prescribed content or enabling the simple acquisition of skills and knowledge. It involves a 'pastoral pedagogy' in which authority and dedicated compassion frames relationships characterised by close pedagogic attention, statistical normalisation, expert analysis and pastoral concern. This expertise inducts learners into being members of communities (national, occupational, disciplinary, ethnic, geographical) with particular capacities for action and innovation (eg. for work, identity, and responsible use of power), framed by publicly accepted norms within those communities.

The organisation of teaching expertise shapes teachers' professional behaviour. 'Restricted professionalism' institutionalizes teaching based on routine expertise. Teachers can follow scripted pedagogies with reasonable effectiveness and are controlled via detailed accountabilities. These scripts limit innovation. 'Extended professionalism' encourages the development of teaching expertise that is responsive to changing conditions. It is therefore non-routine, actively learns, and can operate via unscripted pedagogies within system constraints that support innovation. Rather than a low-trust accountability regime, teaching is self-regulated according to occupational norms of good practice, within externally specified frameworks and community norms.

Australia's capability for innovation and social inclusion is an outcome of teaching expertise that supports learning. This impact is influenced by the way teaching expertise is operationalised across sectors and over time. Currently teachers contribute to Australia by realising potential in:

- 3.4 million students in schools
- 900,000 students in universities
- 1.7 million learners in VET
- 600,000 learners in ACE
- 5.9 million people in work-related training courses

— (ABS, 2008)

Teaching expertise is anchored in occupational communities

The concept of 'occupation' provides a way of thinking about expertise, capacity and how these are mobilised for collective benefit. Occupations are familiar to us. The butcher, baker, candlestick maker, and the teacher, do particular jobs in their communities that are valued for their contribution to self and others. Doing these jobs requires particular kinds of expertise. This expertise gives the occupation and its members a certain standing in society and authority in public affairs.

This idea of 'occupation' captures a sense of collective capacity and agency. Individuals embody expertise but this 'knowing practice' is sustained in occupational groups. Today, we might call them 'communities of practice'.

By working together using their occupational expertise, occupations are created and also create their work. They are formed as identities, embedded in an occupational culture. This expertise anchored in community develops over time, creating distinct collective capacities for action. These capacities consolidate an authority based on expertise, and establish shared understandings of good practice. Occupational identity and culture underpin an occupation's dignity in work. It frames individual worker's pride in a job well done and their commitment to ensure the quality of the work that is done.

The collective agency of an occupation is realised through its capacity to learn and make decisions. These activities define a space or jurisdictional territory for the occupation's expertise relative to other occupational groups. It also establishes the occupation's mandate; its claim to be authoritative when speaking on behalf of that expertise. The mandate and its jurisdiction is sustained through the renewal of occupational expertise over time. As times change, occupations must learn and develop their core expertise needed to get a job done.

Occupational capacity, and the identities and cultures that underpin it, are negotiated in response to external and internal pressures and imperatives. The possibility of occupational learning and development is shaped by the character of the job, the way it is framed as a social contribution, the terms and conditions of work, and the way internal divisions and external imperatives are resolved over time.

The sustainability of occupational expertise depends upon the way collective occupational capacities are consolidated. This may appear a formalised organisation, like a professional association, union or established networks. Increasingly today, it exists in more fluid networked and project-based forms.

Historically, occupational identity and teaching expertise in VET were anchored in TAFE Institutes and community based not-for-profit providers. These providers have been important places for developing and sustaining expertise in teaching adults who do not go to university – more often than not, the socially excluded who are also the educationally disadvantaged.

Price competition drives occupational identity and expertise

Over the last 20 years, VET policies have affirmed price competition in a national training market. In this context, TAFE Institutes and community based not-for-profit providers that have invested in teaching expertise compete with low-overhead for-profit private training providers, intra-state Institutes with different fee structures, and schools and universities that have entered VET as an additional income stream to their main business. This competition drives the price of training down. It also affects everyone's work practices, and has real costs for recruitment and workforce development.

Changing discourses

The lexicon of VET reveals this reconfigured capability. 'From TAFE to VET' redefined the boundary between publicly funded TAFE and private training enterprises. In the process the occupational community that anchored teaching expertise oriented to adults was swallowed up into a larger administrative category, which did not acknowledge the distinctiveness of this occupational expertise. Discursively TAFE disappeared and was reconstituted as a kind of 'training provider' operating in a training market where competition increasingly rested on price.

The occupational group previously termed 'TAFE teachers' became part of the 'VET workforce'. This concept of 'workforce' comes from ABS statistical collections. It represents 'all the people employed', but as an aggregated mass of individuals, without distinguishing between them or recognising their differences and relationships. By contrast, the idea of a teaching 'occupation' recognises a collectivity with specific capacities for action. It is the way people make their living by mobilising their practical knowledge in ongoing collaborations to realise results.

These discursive shifts positioned VET within a human resource management framework. It endorsed organisational authority anchored in vertical employee-employer relations at the expense of occupational authority anchored in relationships based in expertise. This discursive reframing endorsed managerial prerogative and shifted the prior organisational-occupational balance of power in workplaces. People became 'human resources' to be deployed, rather than being communities of practice, who participate in their own making and renewal in changing circumstances, in dialogue with managers, employers and systems.

Reform trajectories and occupational impacts

These discursive developments were grounded in practical reform strategies that affected VET more than other education sectors. These strategies redefined the authority and expertise of the teaching occupation through changes in jurisdiction, mandate and the renewal of occupational expertise.

The shift 'from supply to demand' took up the ideology



of 'provider capture'. With little regard for evidence, it implied TAFE teachers monopolised the specification of vocational education without consulting industry. These suggestions fuelled the development of decision-making frameworks that excluded or marginalised the teaching occupation from the forums that determined what was to be learned, how it was to be taught and assessed.

The impact of this shift in jurisdiction was realised most powerfully through the administrative technology of competency-based training and assessment. This machinery, locked in by accountability measures tied to funding, eroded the teaching occupation's claim to mandate and its capacity to voice its expertise in teaching that supports adult learning. These developments curtailed (even eroded) the authority of teachers to make and realise *in situ* judgments about teaching.

This changing organisation of teaching work was complemented by new qualification requirements. Generalising Certificate IV as the minimum requirement for teaching adults meant that prior TAFE requirements for Diploma or graduate qualifications became optional extras – and optional costs. It institutionalised the 'industry trainer', rather than the applied adult educator, as the occupational norm in VET. The effect was to re-norm cultural understandings of good practice in adult teaching. Requiring a qualification just above Year 12 level, alongside industry experience, also shifted the pool of possible recruits to teaching. It diversified the occupation and diluted the prior occupational culture and levels of teaching expertise.

Impacts and innovation

Price competition and training reforms have had mixed impacts in VET. While participation in VET increased, skill shortages developed, suggesting that access to useful learning and timely renewal of teaching expertise was undercut. Training Packages and accountability requirements now script teaching and learning. Market coordination and funding constraints have also driven innovation. Increased commercial and international activity changed roles and working conditions, intensifying work practices and diversifying employment practices.

The teaching occupation in VET shows remarkable responsiveness to these changing terms and conditions of work.

There was attrition but people also took on new roles, and developed new identities and expertise. They built partnerships, developed networks and initiated client engagements that require boundary crossing relative to previously established frames of time, space, sector and industry. These system impacts and innovations significantly redesigned the work of teaching adults.

They dispersed accumulated expertise in teaching adults and renegotiated occupational authority and governance in VET. The redefined balance of power formed VET as a sector in which the industry trainer, rather than the teacher, was institu-

tionalised as the occupational norm. Limited recognition or endorsement of teaching expertise reduced the jurisdiction and mandate of the teaching occupation. Teacher voice was marginalised in system reform and accountability regimes. The result was low-trust controls rather than harnessing occupational identity and culture to realise publicly agreed outcomes.

VET capability operates in a global market

These impacts and innovations of training reform have formed Australian VET on the basis of restricted teacher professionalism. There is logic to this trajectory in a national market. It broadens access and addresses equity in tertiary education, keeps the price of training down, and maintains the status premium on higher education.

Yet VET capability operates in a global market, which is based increasingly on extended professionalism. Other countries are recognising the contribution that teaching expertise makes to learning, which underpins economic performance, innovation and tolerant democratic societies. Thirty-nine countries signed the Hangzhou Declaration (UNESCO, 2004), which states, 'overall improvement in vocational skills for employability and citizenship can only be realised if there is an improvement in the quality, effectiveness and relevance of teaching'.

In Finland, teachers in public and private adult and vocational education complete Masters level qualifications in Adult Education. Industry trainers do not complete this level of education but, equally, are not recognised as teachers. Even the UK is moving away from restricted professionalism. 'Lifelong learning teachers' are now required to complete Diploma level qualifications and engage in on-going professional learning as a basis for teacher registration.

Australia competes with these countries in a global economy. Competition is increasing in the global training market where Australia's goods and services are traded. There is also labour market competition for skilled labour in global industries. Many countries are improving conditions for teachers because there is a global shortage of teaching expertise.

In Australia, teachers have the highest average age of any industry and have been identified as the most mobile occupational group. The sustainability of teaching expertise that underpins Australia's education and training capacity is prompting some rethinking in relation to school and university teachers.

Yet in VET teaching expertise is downplayed. Its occupational anchoring is more tenuous than in the past. Occupational capacity for renewal is limited by restrictions on professionalism.

Teaching expertise: A resource for innovation?

Governments claim VET capability as a resource for innovation. Yet this capability depends upon the way teaching expertise is institutionalised and mobilised to support learning and innovation in a global economy. In Australia, unlike other countries, this capability entails a restricted professionalism that undercuts teaching expertise and its occupational anchoring. Ironically, the sustainability and renewal of this hard won resource, built up over time through occupational processes of working together and community-building is at risk, just as global demand for teaching expertise to address innovation and inclusion through lifelong learning heats up. ❖

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