

We teach people, not skills

The skill needs of employers and the learning needs of individuals are not the same.



eesa Wheelahan addressed the 2006 AEU TAFE Division AGM in Brisbane.

Vocational education and training policy is based on the assumption that it is possible to separate qualification outcomes from processes of learning. Another way of looking at this is that policy is developed independently of pedagogy. Policy determines outcomes, pedagogy teaches to those outcomes. This is a destructive dichotomy that impoverishes learning and results in simplistic notions of skill.

National training packages stipulate industry-derived competency outcomes. These outcomes are not developed in consultation with teachers, even though VET teachers must be experienced industry practitioners as well as teachers. The separation of means (teaching and learning) from ends (qualification outcomes) is supposed to allow "industry" to specify the skills needed for the workplace, and

Most learning theorists don't support the separation of learning outcomes from processes of learning, but some make a distinction between pedagogy and policy. This is because they are really only interested in pedagogy, and will encourage student-teachers to develop creative and holistic strategies that link learning outcomes and processes of learning. Policy is usually regarded as destructive but also as unchangeable, so it is ignored. The problem with this approach is that it takes no account of the reality of teachers' lives, and therefore struggles to be relevant.

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teachers to develop creative "delivery strategies" (aka curriculum) to teach these skills.

While their reasons for doing so differ, governments, unions and some learning theorists support the separation between means and ends. Governments think that if teachers were to have substantial input into qualification outcomes that we would "capture" the system, and pervert it for our own ends. This is known as "producer-capture". This means that the training system has to be led by "industry" even though "industry" doesn't know very much about training, because it isn't industry's core business.

Many of Australia's unions have supported training packages as a surrogate in the fight against attacks on working conditions. The specification of units of competency is meant to protect working conditions, because they set minimum standards for employment. Access to jobs is via the possession of nationally endorsed qualifications. This has not worked. Many people are employed in the trades, even though they don't hold the necessary "ticket". Moreover, the VET tail should not be used to wag the industrial relations dog, because it doesn't work as an industrial relations strategy, and it distorts VET by insisting on the separation of outcomes from processes of learning.

reveals that current policy is based on behaviourist learning theory. Policy is not "neutral" concerning pedagogy.

Accusations of behaviourism have long been levelled against competency-based training models of curriculum. This is because it assumes that outcomes can be defined and assessed as observable and discrete units of competency.

However, the VET policy/behaviourism nexus is reinforced in other (related) ways. VET policy is premised on constructing markets to regulate the "supply and demand" of skills. Markets must have commodities that are bought and sold, and the VET market buys and sells skills. This means that the "goods" must be specified in advance and broken down, so that buyers (employers) know what they are "buying", and can choose to "buy" this skill, but not that skill. "Training" providers respond to "demand" in the market. Individuals use units of competency as signifiers of skill in the labour market. This leads to the precise specification and assessment of competency outcomes, rather than a focus on processes of learning. The supply and demand model of skill assumes that it is possible to specify a skill and then teach it. In specifying the skill needed the focus is on the outcome — what the person can do, which

is assessed through the direct performance of that skill in the workplace or in a simulated workplace environment. It assumes that skills can be defined discretely. Skills can then be added up in different ways to make different qualifications. Qualifications are aggregations of skills defined as units of competency, rather relational and holistic qualifications in which the relationships between different elements matter, and where the whole is more than the sum of its parts. This is the problem with the idea of "generic skills". They are based on the assumption that they can be defined in isolation from the context that gives them meaning, and unproblematically applied to other contexts.

The "supply and demand" model of skill conflates the skill needs of employers with the learning needs of people who must exercise these skills. The assumption is that industry needs specific skills and the role of education providers is to provide them with these skills. However, the skill needs of employers and the learning needs of individuals are not the same. An assumption that the two are synonymous leads to abstracting skill from the bodies of the people who must exercise the skills.

The supply and demand model assumes we are teaching skills. But we are not teaching skills, we are teaching people. The capacity to exercise skill at work is an emergent property of more fundamental, complex and wide-ranging knowledge, skills and abilities. This relies on the full development of the individual — an individual who has the capacity to live within and make connections between their personal, working and civic lives. So while employers may need specific skills, the condition for securing these skills rests upon individuals' capacity to exercise them, and this capacity cannot be developed by limiting teaching to those skills specified by the employer. This is particularly important for young people and other new entrants to the labour market, who need an education that equips them to live their whole lives, while the focus of the qualification must be necessarily on the vocation for which they are preparing.

If the supply and demand model of skill is ultimately behaviourist and reductive, what are the alternatives? Qualification outcomes should be based on broad process-oriented learning outcomes, rather than the precise specification of skill. This makes more sense for societies and economies experiencing perpetual change.

Qualifications should be based on communities of trust, and not on precise statements about what a person can do. Michael Young is a British sociologist of education who explains that the credibility depends partly on the knowledge and skills it claims for its bearer, but in the end the credibility of a qualification depends on the extent to which it is trusted, and this includes trust in processes of learning. We have a good example of this, with the collapse of trust in the previous Certificate IV in work-place assessment and training, because of the number of 'quickie' weekend courses around the country.

Communities of trust consist of partnerships between employers, professional organisations, teachers and other stakeholders. Disagreements will inevitably occur, but these will help to clarify and develop shared understandings about the multiple purposes qualifications must serve. Disagreements are not always negative. Most importantly, collaborative approaches make it possible to jointly determine outcomes, and outcomes determine the means that are used to achieve them. This is how policy and pedagogy can inform each other, and help to overcome the separation of vocational teaching from vocational practice.

We need to revalorise the depth and complexity of vocational knowledge and its relationship to skill. VET cannot just focus on knowledge needed for work, because the knowledge we need at work doesn't always emerge from our practice, or the training package. This means we need to provide students with access to the academic disciplines that informs their vocation, in ways that are similar to education for the professions. Learning for work needs to go beyond work and occur over multiple sites — which includes the workplace and TAFE.

This is a different model of the policy/pedagogy nexus, but unlike the skill supply and demand model, it makes this relationship clear, and it means that each can be developed in relation to the other.

Leesa Wheelahan is a senior lecturer in the School of Vocational, Technology and Arts Education at Griffith University.



Eve Somssich

Eve Somssich's current position is VET Coordinator, Engineering and Logistics Charles Darwin University-Northern Territory encompassing Logistics, Maritime Studies, Industry Skills, Driver Education and Electrotechnology.

'I am currently the treasurer of AEU-NT and NT member of the National TAFE Council Executive and have been a resident of the Northern Territory for over 20 years.

'I grew up in the Western Suburbs of Sydney where education was a challenge. I attempted senior years at High School and found I was struggling. My first involvement with TAFE was thanks to the mentorship of my former Kindergarten teacher who advised me to pull out of school and attempt a TAFE course. I thrived in this teaching environment, attending the old Granville TAFE and then the Institute of Medical Technology where I studied pathology.

'Over the years I have had many career changes from catering to truck driving. With the involvement of TAFE I have over time received formal qualification for my many roles.

'Prior to being VET leader, I developed and coordinated the Driver Education Unit at CDU. The goal of this unit was to address the training and licensing needs of regional and remote Indigenous people. Low literacy and remoteness, amongst other issues, are barriers for Indigenous people gaining a drivers licence and contribute to their high incarceration rate in the NT.

'My involvement with the Union came from my passion for TAFE and the opportunities it can provide. TAFE has a significant presence in the Northern Territory through the Charles Darwin University (a dual sector institute) and is an important contributor to job-ready training. The Northern Territory faces many challenges to training which make it unique from other states/territories, including remoteness, isolation, and population over large areas, and a 30 per cent Indigenous population. A majority of my VET programs occur in regional and remote areas with an emphasis on Indigenous training, mining and construction.'



Roberta Blackwood Beattie

Roberta Blackwood-Beattie is the Tasmania Representative on the National TAFE Council Executive for 2006-2007 and is a teacher/AST in the Library and Museum Technology program, TAFE Tasmania.

'I have been a member of the union from day one when my then principal, a large towering figure entered my office and suggested I join the union. There appeared to be no other option. That was one of the best career decisions to support my work in TAFE. I became a workplace representative, then a member of the AEU TAFE Executive, Tasmanian division, and now the National TAFE Council Executive. My commitment to the union has naturally increased but so has my commitment to members who I am now able to assist.

'When I joined TAFE Tasmania the head office in Hobart was above a travel agent and we used to joke and say join TAFE to travel. In fact, I have travelled constantly around Tasmania, sun, rain, hail, snow, ice. I have been able to travel to other TAFEs across Australia, to the state capitals, regional towns and cities in Victoria and South Australia, several visits to Canberra to the CIT as well as lobbying for the union at Parliament House.

'During the summer holidays of 1998 I studied Mandarin at Nankai University in Tianjin (200 km from Beijing) — temperature: -23°. In 1999 I worked in Sri Lanka for six months at the National Institute of Education — constant temperature: + 30°.'