

TAFE teachers' professionalism and identity

Clive Chappell argues that there are three dominant discourses which have formed the institutions of TAFE and have shaped TAFE teacher identity. During the earliest phase of technical education, the dominant discourse which constructed the TAFE institution was one quite distinct from university or schools. TAFE's were constituted as institutions primarily responsible for industrial skills training and development. TAFE teachers, therefore were employed because they had specialized vocational knowledge in a trade or other occupation, not because they possessed specialized educational or pedagogical knowledge.¹ At this stage, TAFE teachers sometimes had no recognized teaching qualification or educational training.

As Chappell says:

Industrial skill development constructs TAFE teachers as industry practitioners who happen to teach and this position continues to be reflected in TAFE recruitment policies that continue to require teachers to have industrial expertise.²

Chappell also asserts that the claim to industrial expertise remains an important aspect of the way in which TAFE teachers continue to construct their occupational identity, reflected in industrial agreements, and acting as a point of difference that distinguishes TAFE teachers from teachers working in other educational and training settings.

The Kangan Report signaled a distinctly different approach to technical education in Australia, when for the first time an education philosophy based on principles of access, equity and the primacy of the individual learner in the learning process formed the basis of the system. This approach challenged the narrow instrumentalist view which dominated during TAFE's first phase when the role of the institutions was seen as providing industry with a suitably skilled workforce.

As Chappell suggests:

TAFE in a similar way to schools was now constructed as an educational institution concerned as much with individual learning, educational need, personal and social development as it was with industrial skill development.³

This changed orientation led to two important changes in TAFE – the recruitment of more generalist teachers to cater for the needs of students coming to TAFE to continue or repeat generalist education. At the same time programs for TAFE teachers were developed, distinguished from school teacher training by their emphasis on the principles of adult education. During this phase of TAFE's history, TAFE teachers were constructed

¹ Chappell, C Issues of teacher identity in a restructuring VET system, Working Paper 99-42, UTS Research Centre Vocational Education and Training, p.5

² IBID p.6

³ IBID p.6

not just as industry specialists, but also as liberal educators involved in the education and training of adults.

The third dominant discourse which has contributed to the development both of TAFE itself and TAFE teachers' identity is the notion of public service. It is from this discourse that TAFE's claim to its place as one of the public providers of education in Australia's education system is derived. As Chappell argues, public sector institutions and the staff that work in them are asked to deliver services in ways which are 'equitable, impartial, consistent, directed and which adhere to the rules and regulations of public service and political accountability.'⁴

These three intersecting discourses have collided head on with the new discourses, or forces which have attempted to shape and change vocational education and training over the past ten years. But for the ongoing practice of the majority of our members, these three discourses represent the most powerful way in which TAFE teachers are able to give meaning to the work that they do. What are these "new forces"? In some senses, it does not matter what label is attached to the various policy changes which have occurred. Many see the influence of economic rationalism, others pinpoint the reforms heralded through the Accord and the introduction of competency based training as the triggers for changes in the sector which have significantly altered TAFE.

Chappell corrals them thus:

The globalization of national economies, rapidly changing markets, increased international competition for goods and labour, new technological innovations and the move from mass production to flexible specialization in the production process (Castells 1993:15-18) are all used to suggest that education systems must be reformed to ensure that they fully contribute to the economic adaptations required of modern societies.⁵

We are familiar with the almost totemic catch-cries of the past few years – “provider capture”, “growth through efficiencies”, “efficiencies”, “stakeholders”, “users”, “user choice”, “mutual obligation”, “accountability”, “competition”, – the new language of TAFE is powerful and replete with meaning. It is significant and purposeful. It has itself carried the powerful changes which teachers are so familiar with, whilst at the same time played an almost normalizing role. In a climate carried through from the late 1980's where teachers were so purposefully excluded from any of the debates around the revolution being imposed on the system, the bureaucrats in the system have continued to crush criticism, or any sites for debate or criticism to occur, and have continued to eschew truly representative structures to foster discussion and debate.

If we accept that the three discourses – TAFE teachers as specialist industry practitioner, TAFE teachers as liberal educators and TAFE teachers as public servants - continue to shape the identity of the majority of teachers who remain in the system, then it is little

⁴ IBID p.7

⁵ IBID p.7

wonder that a series of contradictions emerge both for teachers themselves, and for the union which represents them. I will examine this further in a moment, but it is worth mentioning that what I have referred to as the “new language” of TAFE has meaning because it has signified very real changes at the point of learning which have had a profound impact on the character and reality of TAFE institutions, and therefore on the working lives of our members. Indeed the new language of TAFE, the new discourses, disguises changes in government policies which have in some cases gutted the public TAFE system. If we take for example the increasing emphasis on fee-for-service activity in a climate where the growth through efficiency years resulted in significant under funding of the system, then the reality that most of our members are working in is one of severe financial constraint.

In the new TAFE-speak, the anxious search for ‘clients’ is clothed in talk about the new VET professional who must have entrepreneurial and marketing skills. This is a very good example of points at which real difference occur. The policies of VET constructed by the discourses of economic rationalism have dissolved the boundaries that once distinguished TAFE as a public sector organization from an organization of the private sector. As Chappell says, ‘these policies insert the language of the commercial world into the operations of TAFE and emphasise the business nature of the institutions activities’.⁶ The difficulty though is not an esoteric one. Interestingly enough, when issues around the resistance of TAFE teachers to becoming marketers or entrepreneurs is raised, the bureaucrats and administrators identify ‘resistance to change’ as the major obstacle. They simply refuse to recognize the reality of the contemporary TAFE teachers working life, and the impact of the changes on TAFE.

This is not to say that TAFE teachers do not both object to and actively resist what they perceive to be the insidious impact of these changes, particularly on their students. The point I wish to make is that the changes are resisted not just for the sake of resisting change, or because TAFE teachers allegedly cannot cope with change, but rather because the changes themselves are wrong. What is core business for a TAFE teacher? While it may be the case that the capacity to be entrepreneurial and market courses may be a useful and necessary skill to have, when these activities become the primary focus of teachers activities, when no resources are provided for these activities, when no additional time or training is provided, then teachers will resist the activity. In many cases, the pressure on individual teachers to “market” their courses is made even more irritating by the fact that many institutions have well funded marketing departments whose job it is, arguably, to market the institutes’ courses.

Perhaps a better example of the distance between rhetoric and reality is to be found in arguments around “flexible” delivery – another site of considerable dispute and contradiction. Again, TAFE teachers are accused of being change resistant and unable to adapt to the alleged needs of their so-called “clients”. The growing area of workplace delivery is subject itself to a great deal of confusion. TAFE teachers are responsible for the nominal hours in traineeships delivered in the workplace. Do TAFE teachers “deliver” the nominal hours, or do they “assess” the nominal hours? The answer depends

⁶ IBID p.11

on who asks the question. The hours are delivered in the workplace – but not necessarily by the teacher. And yet the TAFE institute (or more commonly, the private provider) is funded for the hours delivered. The (often) young worker is learning on the job, and the role of the teacher is to assess whether or not the skills have been acquired. TAFE simply cannot deliver, or oversee the delivery itself by a teacher, of the traineeship hours delivered in the workplace. A teacher can only realistically assess whether the trainee has acquired the skills. If they haven't there is very little the teacher can do. Whatever any one says, there is no real understanding of what is occurring with traineeships, and their increasingly narrow, enterprise-based focus is a source of criticism for the majority of TAFE teachers who deliver in this way.

My point in raising this though is a more practical one. The resources for traineeships are insufficient to allow any real learning to occur. They simply do not provide sufficient resources to guarantee results. Increasingly, the poor resorting of traineeships creates unsustainable workload pressures on teachers. In particular, travel associated with delivery can be greater than the hours available in the week, and teachers are effectively told not to apply for overtime because they will not get it. This has resulted in incredible pressure in some states where the solution from enterprising managers has been to attempt to employ an underclass of trainers who are paid far less than teachers, or who are paid as much, but without access to any workload or conditions that award employees have. Adding casuals to the mix is dynamite. They simply will not complain because if they do, they will not have a job. This is not “change resistance” – even though there are aspects of the traineeships which should be of concern to all involved in vocational education and training. The reality is that the system is exploiting the new underclass in TAFE – the untrained, non-award trainer or the casual.

I wish now to return to the issue of TAFE teacher identity in the contemporary TAFE environment, and how it impacts on the union and its work. In Rex Hewett's background paper for this session, he gave an outline of the history of teacher education and professional development in the sector. Our policy, developed over the past few years and attached for review at this AGM asserts a number of things in response to the contemporary working environment of our members. In particular, our policy is that 'tertiary level, or equivalent vocational education and training teaching qualifications constitute the appropriate qualification level for TAFE teachers.' We give very reluctant and qualified support to the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training as a minimum qualification, so long as the last sentence “under the direct supervision of” is deleted.

We support the establishment through ANTA of a national TAFE teacher registration body, administered by a registration board with at least 50% representation of registered TAFE teachers. We also support the establishment of an education industrial ITAB, and the establishment of minimum standards for those who teach in vocational education and training. We demand support for professional development and funding for retraining and upgrading of teaching qualifications and updating of industry skills and experience.

It is critically important that we review this policy and that we look at developing and refining the strategies for implementation as a matter of urgency. What I have attempted to do in this paper is give a realistic assessment of the current situation in order to inform the process of review which should follow.

We operate in an environment in TAFE where responsibility for many of the issues which are so critical not just to the future of the TAFE teaching profession but the future of the public TAFE system are shared between the states and the commonwealth. Funding is split between the two, and it has long been the tactic of both to argue that responsibility for the issues raised by our policies lie with the other party. Again by way of touching base with reality, we have no national or state figures which tell us much about the TAFE teaching workforce. We cannot easily discover the mode of employment of TAFE teachers – and therefore answer the critical question of how many are employed casually or by contract. We do not know how many have qualifications, and what those qualifications are. Some states have the figures and will not tell us, others simply do not have them. Where the information is held, it is guarded like state secrets, presumably holding the secret to one states success over another in the competitive market environment of vocational education and training. Our capacity to implement policy is limited by the fact that much of what we can achieve can only be achieved through industrial negotiation, and over the past few years, in the era of enterprise bargaining, the attack on working conditions has been so significant that merely holding the current conditions has been an achievement.

Ironically, at a time when we have Labor governments in each of the states and territories, there has been no move to act in concert to address some of the serious issues raised in our policies. Labor governments have moved in a number of states to establish or re-establish registration bodies for school teachers. To date, none of these have included TAFE teachers.

In Victoria, attempts by the state government to establish an all of workforce TAFE Centre broke down when the government refused to allow the organization to register teachers, but wished instead to establish so-called “voluntary” standards for TAFE teachers. The AEU withdrew from the process at this point, arguing that the development of TAFE teacher standards by a body which it was proposed would have a membership which included 50% TAFE directors, and on which the AEU would have equal membership with the NTEU and other industry representatives and academics would be at best folly, and at worst a disaster. The development of teacher standards, voluntary or not, which would have de facto status because of the TAFE Centre, and outside of the context of any industrial protection would have provided TAFE employers in the state with yet another mechanism to beat teachers around the head.

But in some senses, the events around the establishment of the TAFE Centre in Victoria were a salutary lesson for us, and they should force us to look honestly at our policy today.

It is only the union who can champion the cause of the identity and profession of TAFE teaching because there is no intention and no will anywhere else to do so. I will repeat again the huge irony of an industry whose lifeblood is education and training, whose currency is qualifications should conspire through neglect or through deliberate intent to refuse to support either the accreditation or on-going professional development of its workforce. It is also hugely ironic that the now discredited Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training was foisted on the system with an assertion that it was lifting the standards of qualification of the workforce, when it was patently undermining the qualifications and experience of the existing workforce and reducing standards overall.

I think that the questions that we have to address revolve around the issue of who TAFE teachers are, how they see themselves and what role their work has in forming what is the contemporary TAFE environment. Are they teachers, or are they industry experts? For some the question of the so-called “new VET professional” has become so rarified that the central role of the teacher in TAFE has been removed, and the professional in TAFE is really anyone who works in TAFE – not just the teachers. This is a somewhat ham-fisted attempt to appeal to the divisions within TAFE between teachers and other workers – an artificial division, I would suggest.

I want to quote here from some work done by a TAFE teacher around the establishment of the TAFE Centre in Victoria.

He says:

The problems that TAFE institutions face are not just to do with budgetary constraints nor just with the effects of competition policies. These are facts which may have contributed to the problem, but not by any means the core of the problem themselves. Nor is the problem the demoralization of teachers within TAFE institutions. To the extent there is diminution of energy, enthusiasm and creativity amongst teachers, this too is a symptom of a deeper malaise. Essentially the problem can best be described as a fundamental disorientation of TAFE institutions as educational institutions, or a systemic blurring of focus away from the educational relationship between teachers and students.⁷

I think the core of our policy reflects the view that TAFE institutions are educational institutions, and that TAFE teachers are first and foremost, teachers. It is a critical aspect of the work that we do that we continue to assert this, because as the existing TAFE teaching workforce retires, we are in danger of losing the experience, expertise, knowledge and history of a whole generation of teachers. In a sense, we must not lose our nerve in the bombastic rhetoric which continues to spill out of ANTA and the state bureaucracies. Nor must we lose our nerve when faced with arguments, especially from some of the newer and unqualified people who teach in TAFE that industry knowledge and experience is all that counts, that teaching qualifications are unnecessary, that anyone can teach.

⁷ Moraitis, P., A Theory for TAFE, unpublished, p.1

We have to acknowledge and work around the issues of the inadequacies of teaching qualifications and courses themselves. There should be such a thing as a TAFE teaching qualification, it should be appropriate to the contemporary working environment of TAFE teachers and the students they teach. It should be highly valued and rigorous, but accessible to those who come into TAFE from industry with no teaching experience. It should be a teaching qualification.

Governments need to accept some responsibility for funding both this initial teacher training and the ongoing professional development of the workforce. For almost ten years, in a climate where the majority of people who work in TAFE have no job security, individual teachers have by themselves born the cost of professional development and on-going updating of qualifications.

We cannot and should not accept the notion of a core-periphery workforce of qualified on-going teachers, and poorly paid, unqualified casuals. It is an absolute lie to assert that these workers are employed to bring to the industry current industry skills. They are employed to do the same work that on-going teachers do, for in some cases half as much money. In some states these casuals have been employed as effectively full time casuals for more than ten years. They are used and abused by the system because they are cheap and compliant. Having said this, our strategies must be broad and clever enough not to trade off additional support for casuals for professional development when the major concern of casuals is their mode of employment.

Finally, we must continue the lobbying around representative structures. It would be useful here today to have some debate around the issues of an education industry ITAB, and registration bodies. There are advantages and disadvantages with either, but it would seem critical at this stage, however difficult it is to achieve our policies, that we are clear about what we want.

It is clearly outrageous that there is no teacher-unionist on the ANTA Board and that the AEU has to struggle for a voice within the state bureaucracies. Clearly the Training Reform Agenda would have been different if the voices of teachers had been heard. And as this generation of teachers' moves out of the TAFE system, we must continue to work so that their accumulated experience is not lost, and so that there is another generation of TAFE teachers and their voices are heard.