Alternative possibilities: social impulses in ACE coordinator practices

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Introduction

This paper looks at policy initiatives being circulated into the vocational education and training (VET) incorporating the adult and community education (ACE) sector in Australia, and how these policies are being understood in the working practices of coordinators across the VET sector. Adult education in Australia has been widely regarded as the 'Cinderella' sector (*Beyond Cinderella,* 1997) in the Australian VET context. It has been relatively poorly supported by national policy and funding compared with vocational education and training (VET) sectors. Now ACE is being asked to 'come in line with VET policy and priorities' (Foley, 2006) which is causing difficulty in the outcome-based, vocationally-oriented programs which ACE are being asked to adopt. The paper draws on existing work on neoliberalism in education and its impact on VET and ACE in the Australian setting and adds some new insights into the working practices of coordinators in the Victorian setting. The paper uses data taken from my PhD study and explores how coordinators are being encouraged to meet policy requirements that are in some cases at odds with their traditional roles, ideologies, social purposes and educational philosophies.

The Australian (VET) system is no stranger to change. For more than twenty years VET in Australia has experienced rapid and continuous change through the process of government reform (Harris, Simons and Clayton, 2005; Mulcahy, 2003; Rice, 2000; Seddon, 2000). The impact of the reform process on the VET system has raised many questions about the issue of how VET practitioners react to change (Chappell, 1999) and how change is being experienced and interpreted by practitioners. This paper looks at the professional roles and identity/ies of coordinators in VET and ACE in Victoria to identify how these coordinators negotiate change, by working with, and against, the reform discourses towards meeting the needs of staff, the organizations in which they work and facilitate policy requirements.

There is currently no clear agreement from commentators or government on what kinds of capacities are required by workers, including coordinators and managers, in the VET system to meet the challenges of neoliberal reform in a new economy. Despite this lack of agreement, the change process requires that workers bring to their roles a larger investment of themselves in both work and learning in order to increase the *productivity* and *efficiencies* of their workplaces. This working 'self ' is constructed as a particular kind of self '… that is flexible, autonomous, motivated, self regulating and oriented to life-long learning' – in short, a self that is comfortable in the current context of change and uncertainty (Guba and Lincoln, 2005). Indeed the neoliberal reform measures embed an expectation that all VET practitioners, irrespective of their location, background, organization, culture and qualifications, will contribute to the formation of workplace capability in the new economy (Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996).

Neoliberalism in education

According to Harvey (2006), neoliberalisation has swept across the world like 'a tidal wave' of institutional reform and discursive adjustment. The emergence of neoliberalism has been characterised by the transformation of the administrative state, which is the shift from a state that assumes responsibility for the wellbeing of the individual as well as the economy, to a state that values economic wellbeing over individual wellbeing and has given power to global corporations. Neoliberal reform is arguably designed to install apparatuses and knowledges through which individuals are configured as the productive entrepreneurs of their own lives (Davies and Bansel, 2007).

Harvey (2006, pp.145) defines neoliberalism as a theory of political and economic practices through which entrepreneurial freedoms are maximised within an institutional framework.

> The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices. The state has to be concerned, for example, with the quality and integrity of money.

For Fairclough (2002), the construct of articulating a global market as the new global order is partly a language product. That is, it is achieved through the discursive practices of government. Similarly, for Davies and Bansel (2007, pp.253), neoliberal discourse constitutes a set of relations among government, society and the individual:

> This [discursive relationship] impacts not only on the terms in which subjects are governed, but also on the terms in which they understand and articulate themselves, their lives, their opportunities and desires. At the same time, discourses of commonsense, inevitability and naturalness obscure the ambitions, policies and practices of government through which they both emerge and circulate.

Neoliberal reform in Australia is founded on the premise that the growth of unregulated international capital markets is closely intertwined with the shift in free market domestic policies including privatisation, capital market deregulation and the abandonment of macro-economic management. In the Australian setting, the international mobility of capital has weakened public control over the domestic economy and has intensified pressure for free market reforms (Quiggin, 1999).

In effect, economic reform in Australia has been directed at extending and diversifying the VET landscape. Registered training organizations (RTOs) in Australia now include not only technical and further education (TAFE) institutes, but also private commercial providers, non-government agencies and, more recently, ACE providers, to create a workforce that is diverse and fragmented. All VET practitioners, be they TAFE teachers, ACE coordinators, workplace trainers, human resource development specialists, workplace assessors, learning and development managers, facilitators, tutors or private training consultants, are … 'confronted with a rapidly changing environment that challenges their traditional understanding of their role in vocational education and training' (Chappell and Johnston, 2003, pp.8).

Method

The empirical component of the research involved data taken from my PhD thesis which involved twenty-one adult participants, ranging in age from approximately thirty to sixty years. These participants were located in nine VET organizations; the research looked closely at personal constructions of the participants' working experiences. The data were collected over an eighteen-month period using observations, document analysis and

individual interviews containing open-ended questions. Participants were visited in their workplaces on between four to eight separate occasions. The focus for these visits was observing participants engaged in their professional working practices. Informal observations were made on the following aspects: work practice, work environment, work culture, organizational culture, aspects of professional and managerial identity (eg. dress, interactions with staff), professional role and workplace language. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant using open-ended, guide questions divided into two subcategories. The interview approach accommodated flexibility enabling the participants to 'tell their personal story' along the way. This proved to be a useful and appropriate way to draw from the participant's rich and complex data that presented overlapping contradictions around dominant policy discourses and the emergence of a conflict in understandings of professional identity. The questions were divided into two subheadings and were used to 'flesh out' the experiences of coordinators in various VET organizations across Victoria. The questions were designed to explore issues underpinning the two overarching research questions that is: What discursive constructions of VET policy are evident in the participants' language? and how do these constructions/this language relate to the practices and beliefs of individual participants in their working lives as VET coordinators?

The method involved naming the discursive formations and inter-discursive formations across the data (Sanguinetti, 1998) and mapping discursive formations and charting dynamic relationships (Sanguinetti, 2000). In addition to identifying and mapping identified discursive formations, participants were observed in their workplaces 'doing' their work with particular attention to the environment in which coordinators were working by observing any equipment they were using, the décor that surrounded them, their clothing and so on. These non-human elements (Callon and Law, 1997) were analysed and identified. From these observations data was organized into modes of ordering which are 'like a Foucauldian mini-discourse which runs through, shaping, and being carried in the materially heterogeneous processes which make up the organization' (Law, 2001, pp.1-2). Using modes of ordering allowed for emerging manager identities in the data through the effect of the association of human and non human elements that shaped and tied together manager identity(ies).

Findings

From a close analysis of the data, it appears that there were not one but several modes of ordering management identified in the data and that these modes were working alongside each other, interacting and interfering with one another, Sometimes working together and at other times working against each other (Moser, 2006). The modes identified were: *commerce, vocation, pastoral care* and *social conscience*. The following discussion takes up questions about how these identified modes coexist together and how one mode can slip into another in complex ways to generate possibilities for enabling and disabling alternatives in management practices (Moser, 2005).

Commercial mode

The commercial mode sees coordinators accepting the commercialisation of the VET training market. Coordinators who embody and perform this mode tell stories of understanding the need to incorporate profitability and commercial practices in educational and training programs. Commercial coordinators also tell stories around the importance of understanding training needs and meeting specific industry requirements through the development of tailored programs. Commercially oriented coordinators tell of understanding the shift in VET to a more competitive environment and 'live in' stories of

being equipped and flexible in their approaches to developing competitive and profitable programs.

Strategy is critical for the coordinators in this mode and their perception of strategic planning and strategic thinking is a part of a particular set of management practices and perceived coordinator responsibilities. As Mark explains:

> Our strategic planning sets up the centre to make key areas a priority, for example, in our current first half, our strategic priorities are looking to develop programs out in industry. We want to do this by asking our industry partners what will help them and we develop something around that … Flexibility in our approaches is important to stay competitive.

Mark sees his role as involving the development of strategies to assist staff to work with change rather than against it.

The vocational mode

The coordinators identified in the vocational mode of ordering see their vocation and identity as existing solidly in their original or primary qualification. These coordinators told stories of being in the VET system to deliver programs that qualified people for 'their vocations'. Consider here someone like Janice whose primary qualification was the 'connection' from social worker to ACE coordinator 'where I still work as an advocate for people who often can't assist themselves', or Robyn who understood her vocation as that of a 'nurse first and foremost.'

Attached to this mode are distinct cultural differences, which can give rise to professional sub-groupings (Bucher and Stelling, 1977) both in the VET sector and within VET organizations themselves. These sub-groupings share a specific professional identity and understanding about their role and the nature of their area or discipline, which contributes to a difference in cultural beliefs (Becher, 1989). For the coordinators positioned (and positioning) in this mode, there are implications for their management focus and ideals. With respect to current policy agendas, these 'weaknesses' in professional boundaries can create issues in the delivery of economic policy messages to staff under their supervision.

The pastoral care mode

When looking at the roles of coordinators and head teachers in VET in Australia, researchers have identified pastoral care as an ongoing component of their professional role (Mulcahy, 2004; Rice, 2005). For the coordinators in this mode, dealing with staff issues − negotiating the change process from senior management to staff in a 'palatable' fashion − and delivering pastoral care through the mentoring and counselling of students were ongoing.

Coordinators in this mode told stories of providing ongoing pastoral care across many facets of their work. For example David, working in group training, told of many occasions where his day was spent dealing with student issues.

> I see we do more guiding, directing and teaching, through individual pastoral care, counselling of homelessness and drug and alcohol, family abuse and related issues. We don't have the expertise but we assist regardless by being there.

Providing pastoral care to staff was also an aspect of the role for the coordinators in this mode. This provision was made through one-on-one discussion with staff that combined management skills along with a mentoring and counselling role. For Mark, negotiating and facilitating the change process from senior management to his staff in the centre was ongoing.

> I pick my words carefully when telling staff about change. We have gone through so much change here over the past few years that the staff is *(sic)* often irritated and suspicious of change. I spend some considerable time discussing and counselling my staff through any changes that are being implemented in the centre. This counselling is done one-on-one, in the attempt to make the change process easier for them.

For the coordinators situated in (and across) this mode, pastoral care creates some difficulties. Some of these have been identified in Mulcahy's (2004, pp.11) paper where pastoral care was accepted as an 'integral component' for frontline managers' work, but was also recognised as being work that was not acknowledged or funded. The coordinators in this mode told of feeling overburdened with work and described delivering pastoral care as 'an extra part of the job that goes unnoticed'. The value of pastoral care is recognised as essential for educational managers and coordinators to be mindful of in their working practices with staff and students (Beynon and Wright, 1997). Coordinators in this mode struggle in the same way as identified in Mulcahy (2004) where the pastoral care work of the coordinators was identified as stretched over 'disparate working identities' (pp.11). Coordinators in this mode struggle with the pressures of professional and cultural values committed to economic viability and to the care and counselling of staff and students. Consequently, they are 'burdened' with juggling cultural and business values.

Social conscience mode

Clemens, Hartley and Macrae (2003), in their report on ACE outcomes, acknowledge the vocational contribution of ACE through many of its programs. They also acknowledge the community development role of ACE through what they term the 'cement of social capital through society's goodwill' (ibid, pp.33). Golding and Rogers (2001) describe the positive attributes of ACE programs through flexible and holistic approaches to teaching and learning. These outcomes are developed though connecting people with each other, making contributions through the development of citizenship programs, cultural contributions, the enhancement of community identity and more (Foley, 2005). The diversity and goodwill of ACE is arguably fundamental to its success and contribution to community generally. ACE organizations in Australia play a vital role in providing opportunities for ACE learners to develop options, make choices, overcome barriers and participate in community life (Cross, 2004).

The coordinators who embody and enact this mode of ordering management come from the ACE organizations in the study and present themselves as flexible and creative in their coordination approaches. Coordinators caught up in this mode told stories of being concerned with current funding models linking learning outcomes with vocational outcomes. For Janice, 'having the ability to look after everyone (in the local community) through ACE programs was essential to building local community participation'. Along with other coordinators in this mode, Janice combined her understandings, of her coordination roles with her perceptions of her community development role.

Social justice and community contribution were strong and reoccurring discourses in this mode. Coordinators consistently showed concern about losing the flexibility in their funding

to provide programs for all ACE community participants. For Jane, her coordination role and the role of her organization was to provide an alternative or less structured environment to encourage people to participate who may, according to Jane, 'not connect with a traditional TAFE environment'.

The Coordinaters in this mode constantly used the discourses of respect and community. The coordinators in this mode linked their work in community through these discourses with their work in ACE. This work included coordinators being 'compassionate' for people in their 'care' and describing their work with community as strongly linked to 'my background in social justice and community work'.

Coordinators in this mode told stories about ACE culture and ACE learning centres being 'flexible and inclusive learning spaces'. They saw these spaces as essential to the success of ACE and as contributing to ACE community development. There is an argument here that there is a firmly embedded discourse coming from policy that privileges vocational outcomes and skills development for employment over community discourses of social capital and all-of-community engagement. There is a notion that what constitutes a 'normal' VET/ACE organization, and who it is for (Graham and Slee, 2005), may not correlate with the all-of-community concept or philosophy of inclusivity practised by coordinators embodying and enacting the 'conscience' mode of coordinating in VET. The argument here is that the VET system constitutes itself as an authentically inclusive education system, allowing in 'others' but does so by conditional entry and by no means guarantees inclusiveness (Graham and Slee, 2005, pp.6).

Conclusion

Making space for possibilities

The data shows the coordinators in the study were seen to be caught up in modes of ordering, enacting and performing their working practices. The modes of ordering identified from the data were seen to slip and bump into and between modes creating possibilities for constituting different ways to be a coordinator.

For some of the coordinators there was evidence of ordering that coexisted. For instance, the vocational and the commercial mode, where the notion of vocation for coordinators in the vocational mode of ordering would seem to sit unproblematically alongside the priority in the commercial mode of ordering to work more closely with industry, and develop industry links. This coexistence can position coordinators in the vocational mode as industry specialists, inasmuch as strong links with industry existing through collegial relationships, and strong industry knowledge, afford the manager a specialist understanding and close relationship with their (primary) industry. This kind of close association with industry can add value to VET organizations. There is, however, an opposing point of view where coordinators can problematise VET policy agendas through their priorities for industry over the commercial imperatives of VET, where coordinators' allegiances to one industry area outweigh allegiances to other industry areas, or in the social conscience mode where social justice, community and equity is the predominant guiding principle problematising policy priorities linked to learning outcomes, skills acquisition for employment.

Within contemporary VET policy discourse there are discursive manoeuvres that frame and strive to produce day-to-day practices in institutions and organizations and preferred kinds of manager. As the data suggest however, when delineating different modes of ordering and their effects, coordinators do not fit neatly into categories or necessarily act

coherently as coordinators in. The coordinators in the study were described as moving between modes and 'doing' their practices in a diverse way incorporating their cultural, professional or vocational values and commitments.

The data show that coordinators, teachers and community lie outside the direct control of governments when engaging in their day-to-day practices which can 'distort' and shift governmental directions away from their original intent. This is evidenced through the differing ways of perceiving and enacting flexibility across different modes. There is some evidence to support the notion that the central point of power shifts from government reform as power broker to managers at the frontline level, via the different orderings in which they are caught up and via their different cultural, philosophical and managerial perspectives and positionings.

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