

PAPER:

***THE MEASUREMENT OF LEARNING CONVERSATIONS:
THE ILLUSION OF THE ABSOLUTE OBSCURES MEANING***

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Abstract :

This paper examines the forces upon and concerns of VET researchers when attempting to frame research to develop our understanding of current learning environments.

It begins by characterising such learning environments as both seamless and multiple in their location, and intrinsically fluid in their nature. The argument is that decisions concerning research measurement are particularly complex when learning environments are viewed as a continual series of conversations which provide an almost infinite number of perspectives through the mix of individuals and their interaction through locations and time. The early construction of more positivist frames would therefore seem incompatible and counterproductive.

The paper suggests that there are some specific factors which pressure researchers to move towards a more positivist approach which may restrict the extent to which the rich picture of the learning environment is captured within the data. First, research frameworks are often formed well in advance of research activity due to the pressures of funding applications. Second, proposals in an attempt to be specific about methodology and purpose research proposals err towards the quantifiable. Third, the required response of many projects has an influence on the data sampled as louder voices may ensure the exclusion of others.

This paper then critically reviews personal experiences of VET research and explores with scepticism the early construction of research frames and their implications. Three issues are reviewed; the value of learner-researcher conversations; the defining of learning boundaries by data collection location ; and the rapidity of subject perception change, in an interactive learning context.

The conclusion suggests that given these issues generalisability of research findings may need a government health warning and is perhaps a potentially dangerous concept in an increasingly fluid environment. In addition there needs to be particular concern about the validity of data where the framing of the research appears to have been predetermined rather than shaped by learner events.

While much research is shaped by prior grant applications, both peer review and peer and practitioner acceptance defines the effectiveness of much research. It is therefore for each researcher to question any framework that does not enable and include multiple learner voices in our tentative constructions of what is a complex environment.