

Voices in VET: What is it like to be involved in VET programs in schools?

An apprentice researcher's journey

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INTRODUCTION

The abstract I provided to AVETRA describes a study of the shifts in senior secondary education in NSW over the past decade, in particular the expansion of VET in Schools and the inclusion of VET course in the HSC this year. It also concerns the increasing retention of students from the lower achievement bands in Years 11 and 12. However, that project is still in its very early stages, so I have changed my paper to an examination of the processes and considerations which a new researcher needs to think about when starting on the research journey. Therefore, unlike most AVETRA presentations which report on research already completed or in progress, this paper will examine the meta activity of beginning research, examining the processes researchers go through during these early stages, making explicit the ideas, thinking, skills and tools embedded in research but rarely discussed. Now is the time for those experienced researchers to withdraw while I tell a very small story or puzzle which serves as an analogy for research methodology issues. I will return to this analogy later. This will give you something to ponder on during the less interesting sections and there is a prize for the best or first answer at the end.

A thirsty crow found a pitcher of water in a garden and perched on the side to get a drink. There was only a little water in the bottom, and no matter how hard he tried, the pitcher was too deep and his beak too short, so he could not drink. He thought for a while, then found a way to slake his thirst. What did he do?
Aesop's Fables

When I first contemplated engaging in research as a new academic last year, a colleague gave me an excellent piece of advice. It was to go with my passion. A doctorate requires more commitment than a marriage, it seems from my experience, so I started the journey by examining my working life and very diverse career to see what themes or passions emerged. VET is an emerging discipline attracting people from diverse backgrounds. VET in schools also brings divergence of experience and cultures into a reasonably rigid system, with change as a natural consequence of this diversity. A brief look at my background revealed an interest in those who did not fit into traditional educational contexts as well as a continuing perception of my role as an agent of change.

In my first teaching job in New Zealand in the seventies, I taught French, but I was given a 'fourth form' class (Year 9) called 4 CT made up of thirty-six social and educational rejects. I could name and tell stories of almost all these students even today, although my five French classes are a vague blur. When I arrived in Australia, after some vocational diversions such as the language laboratory at the University of Queensland and being a deckhand on a prawn trawler in the Gulf for a few years, I started teaching on remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island communities in far North Queensland. Here my interest in students who did not fit traditional school systems increased apace, but my main focus remained providing programs and support to make the students fit in with the system as it was. An example of an effort during this time was creating a three-year senior course with language and literacy embedded into all subjects. I also saw that the teachers in these remote schools were almost all young, inexperienced and completely thrown by the fact that the students spoke English only as a second language or dialect. Most appointments were brief and often unsatisfactory for teacher and students. I suggested that a junior English course needed to be written to support and scaffold this ever changing parade of teachers to achieve better language and literacy outcomes for their students. I wrote this course based on a language development model, and implemented it in all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island Community Schools. This involved being an advisory teacher and Education officer for the Queensland department for some years, where I developed an interest in teacher training and professional development.

While working in remote communities, a teacher with an interest in social issues may quickly find they are used as a resource, so I spent a lot of time as an unpaid adult literacy activist assisting people with letters, forms, further study, job applications and other extra curricular activities. This fostered an interest in adult literacy issues which continues now.

When my partner's job brought us to NSW at the beginning of the nineties, I tried teaching within the NSW department at Kyogle High School. I found it a culture shock for many reasons so looked for other career opportunities. Then followed a period working as an adult literacy practitioner with Skillshare, followed by Adult Community Education (ACE) for many years. Here again I worked with Aboriginal people, school system 'failures' and the unemployed - all examples of people who did not fit into the educational system for many reasons and all having vocational aspirations which they found very difficult to fulfil.

Starting at Charles Sturt University as a VET lecturer in August 1999 and reviewing my career lead me to identifying the following themes:

- Students with language, literacy, social issues which bar them from effective and full participation in the current systems of education and training
- Senior secondary schooling opportunities and pathways for vocational success - so they are not forced to approach an adult literacy teacher with tales of negativity and frustration and feelings of being relegated to a social scrap pile
- Teacher training and professional development - especially in light of the fact that most teachers come from a history of successful academic achievement and social conformity and find it difficult to understand those whose background is so very dissimilar from their own

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Now that the passions and ideas had been identified, I considered how to proceed. Our research group, Group for Research in Education and Training (GREAT) offers small grants for pilot projects, but before applying, I thought it would be advisable to take an apprentice role with a more experienced researcher. Doctor Colin Boylan and I submitted a successful application to GREAT and we are anticipating our first meeting next week.

PILOT PROJECT SUMMARY

With increased participation rates over the last five years, more students in senior high school are representative of the lower achievement band. Changes in curriculum to recognise the students who are not bound for tertiary studies have included increased provision of vocational education.

The major aim of the study is to document the perceived issues and differing perspectives of the stakeholders involved in VET in schools. These stakeholders include secondary students, VET teachers and other teachers, parents, employer groups, educational authorities and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. (AECG)

The data will be collected using semi-structured interviews with focus groups representing each of the stakeholder categories. This process will be supplemented by individual interviews with a representative sample drawn from the participants.

The anticipated major outcomes from this study will be to:

- document the stakeholders' perspectives about their experiences of VET in schools
- generate a set of shared emerging issues in VET in schools
- identify where differences exist between stakeholder groups
- analyse the findings to develop a diagnostic tool which characterises elements of successful VET programs in schools.

It is anticipated that this research will lead to a journal publication, as well as providing a gateway to further research on VET in schools.

The report from the Dusseldorp Skills Forum discussing early school leavers indicates that these young people are most at risk in the current economic climate of suffering social and economic

disadvantage. (NATSEM, 1999) This paper formed a different question in my mind: "But what advantages are gained by those who stay, particularly when considering the low achievers and traditionally early school leavers who remain at school under a scheme that a South Australian colleague recently characterised as 'learn for the dole'?" Does VET in Schools provide them with more satisfactory educational and vocational experiences and outcomes? In my focus on VET in schools I am particularly interested in the academic and vocational divide in the senior school system. This extrapolates out for me into areas such as support - eg professional development for teachers and context specific literacy numeracy support for students. Students whose voices interest me in this research include Aboriginal students, students with non-academic aspirations, students with literacy issues, the economically and socially disadvantaged and rural students. I am also interested in standpoints of other stakeholders such as parents, the community and employers. I want to look at the issues from a different perspective - ie - instead of 'supporting' reluctant or at risk students through an alien system which has not served them well historically, take their standpoint to examine the potential changes the VET in schools move could provide to make the school experience more meaningful and vocationally worthwhile for these students through year 11 and 12 and beyond. In a recent study which examined schools students, including many Aboriginal students, using resistance theory, the authors premised that '...it would be expected that resistance to school is generated among groups who historically are socially disadvantaged.' (Munns & McFadden, 2000, p63). All these factors keep reminding me that surely it is time to look at changing the systems rather than continually trying to support and offer piecemeal alternatives to make students fit a system which does not meet their needs.

RESEARCH QUESTION CRITIQUE

When devising this paper and attempting to explain the journey, I constantly envisioned clashes I had experienced with traditional school systems and the dominant forces within and driving them. These are characterised as virtually beyond critique in terms of structure, history and social conformity. Nothing is able to interfere with their continuance, although minor changes may be effected in peripheral ways. In his introduction to Chomsky's 'Profit before people', McChesney asserts that nothing is allowed to interfere with market driven economies. 'At their most eloquent, proponents of neoliberalism sound as if they are doing poor people, the environment and everybody else a tremendous service as they enact policies on behalf of the wealthy few.' (McChesney, 1998, p8) In a similar way, in senior schooling students who are not the intellectual, social or vocational elite often do not fit into a school system designed for, driven by and managed within a narrow social construct favouring the economically and politically viable.

In this section, I would like some participation in this project. The lines between the pilot study and the larger Ph D research are already becoming blurred and much time needs to be taken subduing the researcher's panic that she is too old to be starting a new learning journey.

AIMS OF THE PILOT PROJECT

The pilot project provides an opportunity to research and examine two shifts in secondary school education in NSW, in particular, the inclusion of VET courses in the HSC for the first time in NSW in 2000. The second is the increased retention of students from the lower achievement bands in the senior school.

School-based VET courses are based on industry standards specified by the Australian Qualifications Framework. (AQF) These courses have been developed and endorsed by industry within a competency based framework, where the emphasis is on individual outcomes aligned with industry specific standards, so that outcomes are measured against these standards rather than against the performance of other students.

The teachers of these VET courses must have an industry background. These teachers not only come from a different teaching / training tradition but also must be able to assess individual student performances against industry standards. Consequently, they provide further new voices in secondary education. Collectively, these changes reflect several major paradigm shifts in senior schooling. These include a change from traditional academic and assessment practices to a competency based model of assessment. Another change focuses on the culture, teaching mores and backgrounds of the high school teacher and the VET teacher. Also, in the VET model, students can use school-based

learning in a direct way to build their industry-based credentials, which articulate with further vocational education and training programs.

This study involves gathering information from the voices of the various stakeholders in VET in schools. These stakeholders include secondary students, VET teachers and other teachers, parents, employer groups, educational authorities and the Aboriginal Education Consultative Group. (AECG) In particular, there are a number of secondary students for whom the traditional curriculum is not rewarding. In this study, one of the specific stakeholder groups will include students who might have been expected to leave during Year 11 who are staying on because of their studies in vocational education.

The aims of this study are:

- to identify and document a range of perspectives held by the stakeholders on the experience of being involved in VET in schools.
- to identify the range of issues emerging from each of the stakeholder groups.
- to develop a diagnostic tool to identify elements of best practice in VET programs in schools.

Examining the aims of the pilot project and some of the issues I have raised so far, I invite some comments to assist me in refining and clarifying my questions. More experienced researchers may like to pose new or alternative questions, or offer a critique of the process so far.

METHODOLOGY

First of all I will check who has the solution to the story about the crow. I chose this story as the crow needed a method to achieve his purpose. By using his brains, and the appropriate methodology, the crow was refreshed. I have been learning about research methodology from a variety of sources and have discovered two main viewpoints, which can operate simultaneously:

1. Research methodology is an arcane and treacherous area full of traps for the novice and requiring years of study, debate and the swearing of allegiance to a research 'camp'.
2. Research methodology provides tools which can ensure that the researcher, who chooses wisely, can find out the answers to questions posed and these answers will be SMART (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant and Timely - fitting in with time restraints.) (Bowmer,1997)

Some of the strategies I am adopting to surmount the barrier and fear induced by option one, as I am naturally going for option two, include building and using the networks, both 'natural' and virtual from my previous work history; joining forums such as the Youth Forum to hear other voices and perspectives; seeking mentors who do not see methodology as a barrier to participation in research; linking research with my teaching, which I am able to do with two new VET in schools subjects I am teaching this year; investigating methodologies used by others at Conferences - vital for eliminating undesirable approaches; taking advantage of learning opportunities such as the ACSPRI summer school and the CSU Research Colloquium. 'Learn as you need to' has been a precept guiding my life and can be applied here, so starting on a pilot study with achievable goals and straight forward methodology builds confidence and knowledge to link with future endeavours.

The methodology I am considering for the doctoral study is from the social constructivist paradigm and focuses on conversation, which I am terming voices. I was intrigued by Engestrom 's theory of 'abundant learning', (Engestrom 1999) which has its grounding in Activity Theory and the work of Vygotsky (1978). This theory characterises learning as complex interactions, often non linear and subject to all sorts of outside pressures, which is particularly relevant in VET. "Standard theories of learning are focussed on processes where a subject (traditionally an individual, more recently possibly also an organisation) acquires some identifiable knowledge or skills in such a way that a corresponding, relatively lasting change in the behaviour of the acquired is itself stable and reasonably well defined. There is a competent 'teacher' who knows what is to be learned. The problem is that much of the most intriguing kinds of learning in work organisations violates this presupposition. People and organisations are all the time learning something that is not stable, not even defined or understood ahead of time. In important transformations of our personal lives and

organisational; practices, we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. Standard learning theories have little to offer if one wants to understand these processes. " (Engestrom 1999 p 6.) Engstrom's use of a matrix translates for me into a mosaic, where the 'voices' converge to create a clear and new picture of the issues in VET in schools.

CONCLUSION

Many VET researchers are looking at changing workplaces, and I believe this also implicates changing schools if VET in schools is to be a successful bridge between school and the workplace. In my recent reading of Chomsky's 'Profit over people' (1999), I could draw parallels between the school system, particularly for those students who do not fit, and Chomsky's 'neoliberals', where the advance of a minority calls for the sacrifice of many minorities. Even though Chomsky is discussing global economics and political structures, the analogy is not difficult to see. 'Freedom without opportunity is a devil's gift, and the refusal to provide such opportunities is criminal'. (Chomsky, 1999, p.91) Is the opportunity offered by VET in schools a real opportunity, providing satisfying educational experiences and vocational pathways for students from the lower bands of senior school? Can the current model of schooling be altered to include, entice and benefit the 'outsiders' or is there a need for more fundamental changes, both economic and educational? These are very big questions, but I believe the journey to a Ph D may prove worthwhile if some parts of the answer are revealed by my research.

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