

Do I get a certificate for this Miss? (Interpreting VET momentums)

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Abstract

The title question is intermittently asked by young offenders enrolled in programs provided by a regional TAFE campus in a juvenile justice setting.

These young men are not the only ones checking out what counts in recognition, for whom and in what ways. Variations of the question are being asked internationally by policy makers and practitioners. Closer to home, Victoria has declared an interest in a credit matrix of qualifications. How do we interpret such momentums or initiatives?

*I propose that there are dynamic tensions identifiable in the qualifications initiatives and that their intersection shapes the possibilities. Four sources of tension stand out: **social inclusion, the learning culture, instrumental economics, and the concept of the active self.** That there is some conflict among them does not negate the worth of qualifications reform; rather it can assist discernment and establishment of the priorities and arenas of action. In identifying and working through these tensions we are compelled to ask: *What learning do we want to promote? What sort of social life would qualifications advance?**

Is this kind of interpretation what Engestrom means by ‘contradictions as the driving force of change’ (2001)? The session will use the qualification example to converse about interpretive imperatives.

Introduction

The title question has been put to me at regular intervals by young offenders who partake in a range of VET programs in a juvenile justice centre.¹ The query pertains to whole certificate programs as well to workshops such as Parenting, included in single units of a certificate. These young men are not the only ones asking what makes up a certificate. In policy circles, at least, qualifications talk is gathering momentum!

A qualification system reflects some of the elements of the worth of education and training - explicitly and implicitly. It also indicates something about social life and what counts as important. When changes to a qualification system are touted, it is likely that there are already some mismatches within or between the qualification system, education or/and social life. There are problems for instance in the Recognition of Learning process that assists learners to mark out their way and proceed with learning; and it is difficult for a learner or practitioner to work out the weightings of a specific unit or qualification.

Such mismatches can partly explain the dynamics of the ‘qualification project.’ Those dynamics however, are not just about qualifications but are connected to broader social tensions. These social tensions are manifested in how people, as well as organisations, live, operate and make sense of life (Giddens 1991). In the qualifications initiatives it is possible to discern such tensions between currents of

¹ ‘Miss’ is intermittently used by some Vietnamese young men – especially when they first arrive at the Centre. It is included here to draw attention to the question being from learners.

social inclusion, a learning culture, instrumental economics, and the central place of self. In this paper I elaborate on these currents, and draw out some implications for qualification systems. I also raise the question: Is the identification of dynamic tensions useful? Engestrom thinks it is; I think! I will refer to his use of expansive theory – in particular his notion of *contradictions as the driving force of change* (2001).

What does a qualification system entail?

A qualification system has:

- Purpose. Broadly speaking, qualifications say something about the way education, as well as individual and social-economic life are regarded. The work on qualifications implicitly or explicitly calls up that question.
- Scope. VQA has responsibility for qualifications in Years 11 & 12, for VET and further education. It excludes – at least directly - higher education². Scope also refers to what parts of life are included in education and training qualifications.
- Structure. The way qualifications are set up can provide assurance for each of us in making our way, as well as assist the organisation of life.

Any qualification system will need to have a workable purpose, scope and structure. In the final section I will return to these headings with the implications drawn from the interpretation.

Background

In Australia, the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) is reconsidering the framework of qualifications in the post-compulsory education and training sector, with the intention of reforming the set-up to be more vital and pertinent to individuals as well as to community and state (VQA 2003). A proposal for a credit matrix is one aspect of this, and a discussion process is currently being introduced.

Qualifications initiatives in post-compulsory education and training have been unfolding in various countries. South Africa, New Zealand, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland have all (re)developed frameworks based on variations of a credit principle; England is in process. The European Union has ‘qualifications’ on the ongoing agenda; in higher education, agreement has been established for a common framework of degrees across member countries that includes a credits system (Riding 2003).

There is some assurance in knowing that other places are reconsidering qualification systems, however such endeavour across mainly Western nations, also raises curiosity as to the mainsprings.

A scan of the literature surrounding these projects suggests that:

² The jurisdiction of the VQA is located in Victorian Government legislation: VQA Act 2000.

- Interest in revamping a system of qualifications can indicate a commitment to enhance access, and capacities of students. It can reflect an invigorated commitment to learning across sectors.
- Learning and life are becoming reframed in economic and administrative mentalities; or they may be connecting the fortunes of individuals with productive social life.
- A conflicting interest in notions of individual responsibility for learning can be identified between management and agency.

Clearly, if each of these intentions is operating they must be in tension. Every teacher knows for instance the tussle between unit completions and individual learning agency. Tensions do not negate the worth of qualifications reform; rather they can assist discernment and projections about a future vital qualifications system. They can help establish the priorities of analysis and arenas of action.

In what follows there is some elaboration of the aspects already introduced: the learning culture, the concept of self, social inclusion, and instrumental economics. The paper does not provide an exhaustive analysis of each; rather it identifies salient points of tension which more directly have a bearing on the shape of qualifications.

Learning culture

In local and in international settings, there is a vast range of interest in matters associated with learning and qualifications. The aspects include: vocational (in) education (ACE 2002), generic or employability skills (DEST 2002, Kearns 2001, Dawe 2002), knowledge and learning at work (Engestrom 2001, Billet 2000, Boud & Solomon 2000, Chappell 2002); qualifications and workplace learning (Eraut 2002), learning and flexible specialisation (ACITT & RCVET 2001); standards and levels, pathways and progressions which mark out learning (Raffe 2003, SCQF 2002); parity of esteem between learning in education sectors (NIACE 2002); qualifications and lifelong learning (Behringer, OECD & Coles, QCA 2002). In addition the Australian Qualification Training Framework (AQTF) has set out requirements pertaining to VET learning provision, and others have devised a set of vocational learner checkpoints (Kilpatrick et al 2002). In Victoria the government declares that 'lifelong learning will need to become the norm' and that 'VET is the pivotal player' (Kosky 2002) and in Britain, Tony Blair says that 'education is the best economic policy we have' (cited in Wheelahan 2002:205).

If learning itself is of such interest it is not surprising that a statutory body such as the VQA has as one of its three briefs: *to facilitate procedures which make it easier for people to re-enter education and training and acquire qualifications throughout their lives* (VQA 2003:3).

There are several interpretive points to highlight:

1. Lifelong learning is being regarded as pivotal to individual and socio-economic development. A link with employment and the economy is not without problems, as not everyone is employed. It's a tension! Conceptions of employment and learning become more innovative, for instance the interest in Enterprise education in England (Turner 2003) and the recognition of life experience in

- qualifications (OECD 1996, Behringer, OECD & Coles, QCA 2002). These conceptions expand the field of recognition of what is ‘qualifiable’.
2. Some of the implications of the inclusion of life experience are indicated by the experience of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL). In practice the operation of RPL has been underutilised and problematical in VET and FE (Campus Review, V.12, No.45:6). However, even with the most customer focussed and fulsome participation by providers, there is an inherent tension in the process: if learning is merely the collection and accumulation of credits for life events, something is reduced in both qualifications and life.
 3. This question of what counts, is manifested in the energy and interest in workplace learning, in particular in the dynamics of learning. This interest has been strengthened by activity theory, or its current version in a context of organisations: expansive theory (Engrestrom 2001). For Engrestrom, learning is clearly not confined to a premeditated list of skills - this can be awkward for designers of qualifications!
 4. Active industry involvement in VET also makes plain the push and pull between a ‘just-in-time’ (immediately applicable) approach to training, and multi-skilling or knowledge that deepens and anticipates.
 5. The current policy and research activity surrounding generic capacities or employability skills raises the question of what general and what specific skills and capacities are desirable; who says so, and even who is the teacher.
 6. Employer groups have much to say about what counts as the current ‘employability skills’ report demonstrates (DEST 2002). The discussion around this makes plain the need for a mature relationship between sectors and stakeholders. This would have implications for qualification systems.
 7. The AQF distinguishing features and characteristics can inform talk about generic skills; interestingly, certain features could themselves be deemed generic skills. ‘Taking responsibility for own outputs’ and its variations across certificates levels is one instance (AQF Advisory Board 2002).

Self

The *individual* is not a new concept in education and training. Now influenced by a concept of the entrepreneurial and active self (Giddens 1998), and complicated by ‘multiplicity’ of self, it is central in deliberations about progress and possibilities. This is evident in the use of language such as *choice* and enhancing *individual pathways*. At the same time collaboration and teamwork are promoted.

1. If teaching and learning strategies and arrangements are more cognisant of learners’ purposes, not only needs, but possibilities, there are implications for exit and entry points to programs, and for attendance arrangements.
2. Notions of agency and choice call on pedagogy which is attentive to ‘learning to learn’. Historically, the Adult Community Education sector, as well as some TAFE programs have been mindful of this interest, for instance explicitly through Return to Study programs, and in Victoria, the Diploma of Liberal Arts.
3. Ostensibly, there is more of an onus on the learner to ‘reflexively’ fend for themselves. However, self-reliance is not clear cut. For some participants in education and training, there is instruction and guidance at many levels of involvement in the nexus. Involvement with disengaged youth shows us that assistance and guidance can be double-edged. It would become a dilemma for

proponents of agency, if in ten years time some groups of learners are, paradoxically, more administered or managed.

4. The depiction of the autonomous and flexible new worker does not line up with the way all work is organised according to *Beyond Flexibility* (ACITT & RCVET 2001). The differences they point to are best understood in terms of 'skill ecosystems' that are formed by the intersection of business settings, institutional and policy frameworks.
5. A recent discussion paper on qualifications used the dimension: *Autonomy, accountability and working with others*, to distinguish levels of capacity and attainment in education and training. This work from Scotland shows that a reconfiguration is an intricate exercise, but the attention to work dynamics is a pivotal point (unpublished discussion paper, SQA and SCOTTO 2002). The area is at once obvious and yet difficult to measure, in part because it is little researched (Chappell 2002).
6. Being active and self reliant requires the self to have a level of trust and a capacity for risk management (Giddens 1991)! To enable this, a qualification system has to be *trustworthy*. This is helped if the rules about what counts are confirmed and coherent. At present a learner often has to be entrepreneurial to discover what counts for credit transfers, for recognition of learning (Campus Review, v.12, no.45:6) and even for processes of entry to various learning providers.
7. The concept of autonomy and agency also has an inherent tension – that of being our own custodians in a social world!

Social inclusion

The persistence of unemployment in Western countries has precipitated various movements in orientation of education and training policy. Of particular pertinence is recognition of learning, of achievement, of capacity and the scope to locate oneself in a qualification system.

1. International policy movements indicate a new level of integration between welfare, work, and (vocational) education and training. In Europe, the European Social Fund projects must display attention to lifelong learning, social productivity and inclusion (ESF 1998). In Victoria inclusion is linked with the 'innovation economy;' capacities - of individual and of the state - is a key notion (Kosky 2002).
2. In Australia, the setting up of the *Victorian Certificate in Applied Learning* (VQA 2002) and the development of the *Local Learning Employment Networks* (LLENs) are two post-compulsory initiatives which are attentive to these factors. The VCAL pilot experience in 2002 and its subsequent take up in 2003, reminds us that a student qualification is entwined in a constellation that has personal and social ramifications. In this case, there is an umbrella qualification, as well as a multiplicity of means which appears to suit particular groups, at least to maintain a connection to learning at that point.
3. One tension in those structures is that the setting up of tailored qualification routes and arrangements can exacerbate disparity. On the other hand, they can be a source of recognition and development of capacities.
4. Difference in status of sectors and courses is entrenched, and inhibits social inclusion. An education and training system and its qualification set-up exacerbates this when it marks programs, and specifies learning capacities with

oppositional (and arguable) delineations such as: doing or thinking, using hands or mind, or even academic or practical. It is not just a problem of parity of esteem – of sectors or programs - if the grounds of difference are themselves spurious.

Instrumental economics

The impact of the market economics and of international dynamics is traceable in each of *learning culture*, and *social exclusion/inclusion*. Economic mentalities also intersect with the notion of the entrepreneurial self: – that we are our own business. In the dynamics of qualifications, there are also associated aspects of corporate administration or governance.

1. In Australia, as elsewhere, the nineties saw increasing industry involvement in vocational education and training and an accompanying ethos of immediate or visible usability demonstrated in the implementation of competency based teaching, training packages and the expansion of VET in schools. One of the dilemmas that emerged with this shift is whether this viewpoint is narrowing the scope of what is recognised as learning, and of what is to be learnt. In turn there is an impact on the use of qualifications (Eraut 2002).
2. The relationship between education and employment training, indeed between education and the economy has never been one of complete ease.³ More recently, there is a range of responses to the influence of business and industry that has accompanied the introduction of Training Packages and a national review is pending.⁴
3. Comyn (2002:8) links the ‘return of a generic skill agenda’ to international ‘grapples’ with the notion of competencies to enhance individual fortunes as well as to meet social challenges. The tension between both is indicated by the shifting use of employability and generic to denote focus.
4. The concept of innovation economy is used by Government as a statement of intent. However, generalised descriptions of the technologically innovative, flexible worker by-pass an expansion of low skill insecure jobs and an export of low remunerated production work (Ball 1998, Chappell 2000, ACITT & RCVET 2001).
5. Such differences remind us that the kind of ‘imagined futures’ that once could be assumed to be a source of planning are more difficult to generate. Despite the increasing attention to measurement of outcomes in VET, life is less certain and less able to be conclusively measured. There is much knowledge that is contingent (Giddens 1991). This is also a challenge to the ‘authority’ of qualifications and thus of their currency.
6. It seems that in Victoria the LLENs are helping to ground employment initiatives in a broader context. A LLEN has a geographical base that assists that social location. In this period of introduction in Victoria they reflect a notion of employment that is situated with the rest of life. This is vital in a world of constant global activity.
7. Quality assurance systems are the main official public means of measuring trustworthiness or reducing risks in education and training at present. On a daily scale, for learners it is probably the teachers or administrators – the *system representatives* - who engender that trust – or otherwise (Giddens 1991).

³ Dewey knew this! (1916)

⁴ MINCO meeting February.

8. Alongside this kind of general uncertainty one response is to look for what can be seen to work now, and be measured (Young 2002). This places systems such as education, and its concomitant – qualifications - under pressure to perform.
9. The AQTF in the Australian VET sector has brought assessment, accountability and ‘quality’ to centre stage, but it may be a distraction from the growing imperative to develop even more trustworthy, innovative and inclusive teaching and learning pedagogy.

What are the implications of the interpretation presented?

The proposal of this paper is that the dynamics of the interest in qualifications systems can be located in the intersection of four social sites of tension in the field of post-compulsory education and training. These are: the learning culture, social inclusion, attention to the self, and instrumental economics. The mismatches that have been surveyed can point to the kind of world VET is advancing. The purpose can assist us to sharpen attention on the arenas of action for a qualifications set-up.

The elements of a qualification system marked out in the beginning of this paper – purpose, scope and structure - can now be fleshed out with proposed working principles and arenas of action.

Purpose [Broadly speaking, qualifications say something about the way education, as well as individual and social-economic life are regarded].

A vital education and training system is one that:

- enhances capable and reflective participation in productive life – for individuals and the state;
- provides scope for participants to shape their education and training histories;
- has a versatile but traceable qualifications system that reflects fitness for purpose.

Scope [VQA has responsibility for qualifications in Years 11 & 12, for VET and further education. It excludes – at least directly - higher education⁵. Scope also means what parts of life are included in education and training qualifications].

- There is scope to recognise that learning includes, but is not encompassed by the notion of skills.
- Attention to lifelong learning expands the notion of vocational to include the range of productive life involvements.
- An academic-vocational divide needs to be reconfigured to attend to learning conditions and strategies, settings of learning, knowledge and skills.
- An opening up of the time frame would enhance the structuring of employment, productive activity and learning across a life time (ACITT & RCVET 2001, McDonald 1997).

⁵ The jurisdiction of the VQA is located in Victorian Government legislation: VQA Act 2000.

- Recognising the attention to the self and to interest in learning: units such as ‘Learning to learn’ ‘Reflection on practice,’ can be encompassed in qualifications either as discrete units or as underpinning teaching/training practice.
- Generic skills can be incorporated into whole qualifications by specifying generic vocational competencies within clusters of qualifications. It combines the general and specialist and is an extension of the use of core skills pertaining to qualifications in the one stream that is currently in Training Packages.
- Even this much requires commitment to more talk between education sectors!

Structure [The way qualifications are set up can provide assurance for each of us in making our way, as well as assist the organisation of life].

- Credit transfers and recognition of learning processes can be made smarter and more public. This may require a more standard way of working out the relationship between components as well as whole qualifications. This is especially vital if there is more attention to the range of productive life involvements.
- It is also in keeping with biographies to certify units as discrete qualifications – appropriate to the intention.
- The notion of a course with fixed entry and exit points, a specific setting and cohort of students becomes less assumed. Time spans and locations of learning can be less uniform.
- It may also be appropriate to require attendance for certain units or proportions of whole courses – in order to qualify. This acknowledges that learning and knowledge is not just experience.
- It is interesting to consider the potential connection between generic capacities and ‘distinguishing features of learning outcomes’ used to delineate certificate levels in the Australian Qualifications Framework.

What are the implications for an interpretive framework?

The qualification example raises interpretive imperatives. I will refer to the approach used in this paper in the light of Engrestrom’s use of expansive theory (2001) to draw out the salient points in the approach of this paper. These will inform the conversation in the conference session.

Expansive theory

Engrestrom’s starting point in *Expansive Learning at Work* (2001) is that standard theories of learning do not encompass all learning; that in important transformations of our personal lives and organisational practices, new matters emerge for which current ways of understanding or handling are inadequate. Therefore we must learn new forms of activity which are not yet there. For example, in workplaces we don’t always know what we need to know ahead of time. Drawing on a situation of management of medical care, Engrestrom presents his dynamic of learning in organisational life.

The gist is this: In a particular medical care case there was a new problem identified concerning who takes responsibility for care of children with multiple illnesses. The governing operating model was case management meetings around one illness and

this was not satisfactory. Children with several illnesses and points of contact with the health system were receiving care from a variety of teams associated with the central hospital, and other primary carers with whom there was insufficient contact. Furthermore, the relationship between local and central medical services had already been identified as a problem, and the monopoly of the centre was also being challenged by a cost imperative for increased use of local care. The hospital decided to look at a redesign with the participation of the various involved parties, including parents.

Having to deal with this case called forth some tension. Engrestrom outlines the various stages and dilemmas noting key questions and dynamics which led to progress. For instance, he assisted participants to face internal demands. For instance the pull of cost efficiency, as well as maintenance of disease focused model that had led to hospital based critical pathways management of particular illnesses, and the care management responsibility of the local health centre, not to mention the problem for parents of *unavailable tools for mastering* what was happening to their child (2001:145). The process enabled people to move from a defensive standpoint to a *growing determination* (2001:146) or engagement in the new realisations of what the matters were. This led to new solutions. The *care agreement* model introduced a new level of collaboration in the development and sharing of information and care options and responsibilities. In this case the solution was not established for evermore. There was still an active process of review of practice at the time of writing.

The setting in this case is inter-organisational learning. One of the key operating principles in the process is the necessity of dialogues between different perspectives or traditions (2001:135). Further to this is the principle of contradiction. Engrestrom says that it was vital to:

trigger some internal tensions and dynamics in their respective institutional contexts – to energise a serious learning effort (2001:140).

The trigger is the questions and analysis aimed at clarifying what the matters are and the contradictions behind them. The actions are not only for effective dynamics. It is acknowledging that they are there as historical elements.

Expansive learning is however, not set up to replace all learning or relationships between learner and source of learning. Rather Engrestrom regards it as complementary dimension - a 'sideways' initiative.

Implications for interpretation

Clearly there are common interpretive grounds in expansive learning and the case presented here of the qualifications momentums. Certain mismatches were the evident starting point, for instance that of lifelong learning and a system that makes qualifications between sectors difficult for learners to gauge. Such aspects were considered as part of larger social tensions, (viz-a-viz agency and economic instrumentality).

Engrestrom's example is a working one. That is it is centred on action. Are there differences in intent in the qualifications instance? This matter can be taken up in the conference session. Suffice to say here, that in this qualifications case, more

intersecting aspects were noticed, encompassed, and subsequently interpreted to inform arenas of action. This level of talk leads to more appropriate or developed solutions than may first appear. Interpretation which seeks out underlying tensions can also call up collaboration between what could otherwise be antagonistic parties.

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