'THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM'[1]: AUDIT CULTURE AND TAFE TEACHERS

Stephen Black & Ann Reich, University of Technology, Sydney

Abstract

The work of TAFE teachers has changed considerably in the past decade or more, as indicated in numerous studies (e.g. Chappell & Johnston 2003, Harris, Simon & Clayton 2005). However, one aspect of change which has not featured prominently in Australian VET research is the much increased compliance with audit requirements, and arguably it is the scale of this increased compliance that could be said to have transformed the work of TAFE teachers in recent years (see Black 2009a 2009b). The relative neglect of research into this aspect of change explains the title of this paper, 'the elephant in the room' (see Groundwater-Smith & Mockler 2009: 73). This paper is an introductory exploration of the 'audit culture' (Apple 2007, Strathern 2000) as it affects TAFE teachers. After outlining some of the conceptual notions of the audit culture in the research literature, and especially in relation to VET, the paper then examines the effects of the audit culture on teachers and their responses. The teacher data are obtained through several methods: firstly, a state-wide, emailed survey questionnaire on the changing role of head teachers in TAFE NSW (Black 2009a 2009b); secondly, in-depth, taped interviews with head teachers across two TAFE NSW Institutes; and thirdly, a series of taped, focus group discussions with teaching staff from several TAFE NSW Access sections. Through an examination of these data the effects of audits on the work of teachers will be discussed, as well as an exploration of the tensions between the audit requirements and the teachers' professional expertise.

Introduction

Much has been written about the unparalleled changes in Australian VET in the past decade or more, especially as they relate to the work of TAFE teachers and how these teachers respond to aspects of change such as training packages, competition, technology, competency-based training and flexible delivery (e.g. Chappell & Johnston 2003, Harris, Simon & Clayton 2005). More recently, there has been the call for 'advanced VET practitioners' with attributes that represent, 'a new hybrid mix of educational and business thinking' (Mitchell 2008: 3). Similarly, TAFE corporate policy statements indicate the need for entrepreneurial, innovative and creative teachers, completely in tune with the needs of industry and the market generally (TAFE NSW 2007). However, recent research on the work of head teachers in TAFE NSW (Black 2009a, 2009b), has indicated the problematic nature of teachers adopting the new workplace identities required of them, especially given the excessive time spent on "paperwork" related to compliance (see also Rice 2005). This increased paperwork has been generated largely in response to the need to comply with new regulatory regimes using audits as a key mechanism for assuring quality of the systems - what could be described as an 'audit culture' (e.g. Apple 2007, Strathern 2000). This paper is an initial exploration of the audit culture in TAFE and its effects on teachers and their identities. It indicates that such is the dominating influence of the audit culture that it has transformed the work of TAFE teachers. And yet, it remains 'the elephant in the room' (Groundwater-Smith & Mockler

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[1] Idiom drawn from Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009:73)

2009:73) in so far as its influence on the work of TAFE teachers has gained relatively little attention in Australian VET research.

Literature review

The audit culture

Leys (2003, cited in Apple 2007:7) refers to auditing as: 'the use of business derived concepts of independent supervision to measure and evaluate performance by public agencies and public employees ...' According to Power (1997: 3), there was an 'audit explosion' around the late 1980s and early 1990s in Britain in which, 'a growing population of "auditees" began to experience a wave of formalised and detailed checking up on what they do'. Audits are now common place world-wide and have become a key technique, associated with the "new public management" approaches, for assuring quality in public sector organisations. This "new" approach to public sector management has used the techniques of commercial enterprises such as 'accountability, explicit standards and measures of performance, emphasis on outputs, not inputs, with rewards linked to performance, desegregation of functions into corporatized units operating with their own budgets and trading with one another, contracts and competition, and insistence on parsimony maintained by budget discipline' (Rose 1999: 150). The managers in public service organisations (such as TAFE) have been required to become calculating, problem-solving entrepreneurs in the competitive markets (Reich, 2005) and in particular the frontline managers (such as head teachers), and the managers of business unit budgets and commercial programs (Chappell & Johnston 2003). Associated with the new public management approach, the audit, borrowing techniques from accounting and auditing, has became the organisation's way of limiting risk and assuring trust in public service systems ranging from professional services in health and education to social services. As Rose (1999: 154) suggests, the 'auditing processes hold out the promise – however specious – of new distantiated forms of control between political centres of decision and autonomized loci – schools, hospitals, firms – which now have the responsibility for the government of health, wealth and happiness'. This form of audit is described by Power (1997), as "control of control", in acting on the control systems themselves from a distance, rather than from earlier supervisory inspection processes. This audit process shapes the "governed" (that is the teachers, head teachers, managers) by prescribing the processes to be audited, such as processes for setting outcomes and systems of record-setting (Rose 1999). The emphasis on establishing and maintaining trust in the system is on so-called computerised and other recording technologies, such as the paper trail, rather than the professional expertise of the teacher in the classroom (or workplace). In this way 'the logics and technical requirements of audit displace the internal logics of expertise' (Rose 1999: 154).

Audits and education

The audit culture has permeated educational organisations at all levels. In higher education in Britain for example, Shore and Wright (1999) indicate the audit mechanisms expressed within terms of "improved quality" have been introduced for measuring teaching performance and research. Part of their argument, drawing on the work of Foucault (1977), is to link these "disciplinary" mechanisms to a new form of coercive neo-liberal governmentality.

Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2009) focus on the schooling system, but their discussion also resonates strongly with the situation confronting teachers in the VET

system. They point to the need to "mind the gap" that has developed between the subjectivity of professional teacher judgement and the objectivity measures of standardised assessment deployed in audits. The pervasiveness of the latter in the form of the many "quality assurance" procedures teachers need to comply with, in effect, has diminished the role of teacher professional judgement.

Audits and VET

One critical analysis of the effects of the audit culture on the VET system is provided by Hodkinson (2008) in a study of the British further education (FE) system. He sees parallels and links between the rise of the audit culture and the rise of evidence-based practices in academic research, which he terms a neo-positivistic research stance. These new "regimes of truth" have had damaging effects on educational provision. Henceforth, quantitative measures of performance such as completion rates and student retention rates predominated, measures which were considered by many educational bureaucrats to be robust and universally applicable. According to Hodkinson (2008), the FE sector has demonstrated the extreme aspects of audits due to its relatively low status and the competitive basis for its funding. In FE colleges, considerable time is spent collecting data to demonstrate performance in order to bid for funding. "Inspections" of teachers by external agencies and internally by peers are a common and dominating feature of FE college life. And yet, despite the micro management of teaching, standardisation of practices and the enormous resources in terms of time and paperwork spent accounting for performance, there is little evidence that student learning has improved. As Hodkinson indicates, there are many complex variables in the learning process, and what is valuable is often hard to measure in quantitative terms. It is largely as a reaction to the audit culture that some researchers in Britain are now focusing on improving "learning cultures" in FE, which acknowledge the complex social practice dimensions of learning (e.g. James et al 2007).

The intensification of work in the VET sector involving teachers "drowning under paperwork" and being subject to closer surveillance has been outlined by other researchers. Avis (2007: 105) for example, also from a British FE perspective, writes of how 'performance management enables the state and its institutional arm within management to direct practice'. However, Avis (2007) cites other research (e.g. Gleeson & Shain 1999) which indicates that compliance by teachers is not automatic, and is sometimes unwilling and a part of the tensions felt by teachers between compliance and their professional judgements of the educational value of activities. He concludes that the "competitive settlement", with its enforced standardisation of practices, deskilling of teachers and intensification of labour has transformed the work of FE. And yet, concurrent with these changes, in the classroom mediations involving teachers and students there remains 'a space for struggle as well as outcomes that are contrary to those of policy makers and curriculum designers' (Avis, 2007: 125-126).

In Australian VET there are few studies which directly engage with these issues. Kell (2006) provides a broad, critical analysis of the current and future role of the main public provider, TAFE, and he outlines perspectives on teaching "under the squeeze", in which audit pressures are a key part. Golding and Vallence (2002) also critiqued quantitative measures used in quality audits in VET. Recently, Seddon (2009:69) has outlined the way the Australian VET audit culture has focused exclusively on government and industry agendas and has by-passed practitioner perspectives, leading to a situation in which 'there is compliance but not commitment'. Beyond these studies, however, audit cultures do not

feature prominently in the research literature, though recent research on the role of head teachers in TAFE, shows they are experiencing considerable audit pressures resulting in administrative overload and a subsequent neglect of educational leadership (Black 2009a, 2009b, Rice 2005). Similarly, Reich (2005) discusses the role of the audit as a key feature of neoliberal VET reforms in Australia and how the audit by state training authorities 'became the key technique for restoring and maintaining trust in the professional expertise of those in the training system' (Reich 2005: 119).

Despite the relative lack of research focus on audits and compliance, the policy documents and guidelines relevant to TAFE as the major public VET provider reflect its highly regulated audit environment. TAFE NSW "quality policy", for example, states that the organisation '... encompasses the development, monitoring and review of processes and procedures which support best practice in complying with quality standards within the national and state regulatory framework' (NSW Department of Education and Training 2009). As a Registered Training Organisation (RTO), TAFE states it complies with Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) standards as a *Guarantee of Service*. Further, TAFE NSW Institutes proudly announce on their homepages their compliance with international standards of business processes and procedures, such as the ISO 9001:2000.

Research method

Data for this paper were obtained through several research methods, all involving qualitative data. Firstly, there was a re-examination of survey questionnaire responses from head teachers in a state-wide survey on the changing role of head teachers (Black 2009a, 2009b). This questionnaire sought largely open ended responses on a range of aspects of head teacher work. While much of this has been reported, for this paper, specific responses to the question on audits were analysed.

Secondly, taped, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve head teachers across two TAFE NSW Institutes. The head teachers represented a full range of vocational areas including traditional trades and general education. These interviews were conducted at the time primarily to augment the above state-wide survey questionnaires of head teachers. The interviews focused on the changing role of head teachers, and as with the survey questionnaire, the interview questions focused on issues that included: satisfaction with the job, how the role has changed (including responses to audits), levels of support, professional development needs, and suggestions for a more effective head teacher role.

Thirdly, three recorded focus group sessions were conducted in Access sections in three TAFE NSW colleges. The groups comprised mainly full time teachers with 8-12 teachers in each group. All teachers were female, mostly in a 50-59 year age group, who had been working in their Access sections for many years. Focus questions related to their experiences of changing pedagogy over the past decade or more, including what and how they teach, and their responses to curriculum and other changes.

Findings and discussion

Facing up to an audit culture

The different types of audits that teachers and head teachers are expected to comply with are too numerous to mention in a short paper. Many relate to training package and

curriculum requirements, course delivery, aspects such as assessment validation, ensuring correct course versions are used, and ensuring that for the students there is sufficient evidence of their participation. One teacher, for example, cited "version control" to be a significant issue: 'everything has to be version control, nobody can go into a classroom with any piece of paper unless it's version control'. This same teacher in a trade area further explained the standardisation of delivery and the record keeping required, stating:

> Teachers used to do their own prep, go in and teach, come out and do their marking. That's not on any more. Every single class has to be the same, and right across the Institute ... You've got to prove to the auditor that your students have been participating in the class, so we've got to keep all this paperwork, all those feedback sheets

A formal audit can be internal, often under the auspices of Institute Quality Assurance staff, or external, undertaken by agencies such as the NCVER. A formal audit usually involves advance notice that an audit will take place (which may be a couple of weeks), and an outline is provided of the main focus of the audit. The auditors themselves may spend several hours with the head of the teaching section examining evidence that there is compliance with the standards required, and a formal report detailing the extent of compliance is later provided to the institution.

A distinction needs to be made between the role of head teachers and regular teachers in TAFE, with the former combining teaching with a frontline management role and therefore likely to experience additional kinds of audit pressures. For example, and somewhat typically of respondents, one head teacher listed her work duties to include: '... financial management budgeting, RPL targets, ASH targets ... AQTF audits, ITSE audits, ISO audits, internal audits, ICChecklists ...' (see Black 2009a: 5 for an explanation of acronyms). Teachers, on the other hand, are more likely to experience audits in terms of the prescription of course outcomes determining what they teach, complying with various aspects of assessment regimes, and maintaining detailed and accurate student records. They are required to provide evidence that all aspects of course delivery are being undertaken according to the established standards (often outlined in Internal Control Checklists which need to be signed off by supervising officers). Typically, the documentation required for auditors may involve photocopying multiple class sets of course assessment guidelines and then obtaining the signatures of every student in the class declaring they have received all the assessment information for their course. These tasks are usually tedious and time consuming. In other examples, audit procedures may involve producing checklists of the learning outcomes of every unit a student is enrolled in, and teachers are required to 'tick-the-boxes' for each student in each lesson to indicate which learning outcomes have been addressed. Detailed lesson plans need to match with these records as evidence each student has participated in all of their enrolled units.

There is no doubt from the responses collated for both head teachers and teachers that there has been a rapid escalation in at least the last decade in the audit demands made of them, and that they serve to regulate almost every aspect of their work. As reported previously by Black (2009a:14), head teachers report a 'huge increase in the volume of work around audits requirement,' and that they are 'a nightmare'. One interview respondent, a head teacher for the past 15 years, commented that the constant monitoring and checking of their work was relatively new and came as a surprise to her. She stated:

> I don't remember when I started head teaching, auditing. The first I remember was the verified tasks. We didn't used to have verified tasks, and I remember being audited and being told 'you don't have a single verified task'

Another head teacher seemed to encapsulate the current situation for many teachers in stating:

> We're now always being audited, either internally or externally, so that you always have this unseen audience there. Sometimes you feel they are ready to pounce, and so you need to make sure you are covered maybe for something that will never eventuate

Some respondents made the point that audits appeared never ending, with one head teacher stating, '... no matter how hard I work, I know I am not meeting all the audit requirements'. Further, systems and procedures do not remain static, as a teacher stated in relation to training packages, 'basically they are reviewed every three or four years, so by the time we get one lot set up, the next lot come in and you have to redo everything again. It's never ending'.

One area of compliance that has always been important is safety in the workplace and training, especially in some trades sections which require strict operating procedures, risk analysis and occupational health and safety compliance. But this compliance appears increasingly more time-consuming and onerous, with a focus on the "paper trail" rather than the student's acquisition of the necessary knowledge and skills. One teacher stated that in his trade area:

> for every tool you've got a risk analysis, you've got to teach that to the students, they've got to sign, you've got to say that they did learn it correctly, and then you've got to continually update all the signage and things like that. Every tool's got to have a safety operating procedure on it

Staff qualifications are another area of compliance with implications for the work of both head teachers and teachers. For example, a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is the new minimum teaching qualification in VET which some teachers have been slow to acquire. As one head teacher explained:

> you've got to have a policy in place explaining how it is that this part time teacher who hasn't got a Cert IV can teach a class, but can't do any assessments, and who does the assessments, and we've got to actually put that person on with composite classes so that it's the other person's job. It's not easy to juggle that around

And all this, the head teacher explained, was for '... a piece of paper that just allows him to do what he's been doing for us for years anyway'.

'More and more we operate for auditors, not students'

While doubtless many audit procedures are considered essential, such as in the area of workplace and training safety, many respondents felt that the auditing processes had extended too far, and that somehow the core purpose of TAFE, delivering quality education and training to students, had been compromised. In some cases, respondents could see little or no educational value in the audit processes. For example, one head teacher spoke of a program she manages:

> ... they ask for reporting requirements that are over and above what is necessary, and is absolutely absurd. For example, they want us to record every single phone call that we make about a student or to a student. Which is just, you know, absurdly over the top, and for what reason, you just can't see the educational value

Comments like this were common amongst many respondents, and in some cases audit requirements were seen not just to be of little educational value, but to actually counter good educational practices. One head teacher commented on a 'youth at risk' program:

> ... they're required to have a report on every student, every fortnight. [they are] Supposed to show how their goals have changed every fortnight, which is not only educationally unsound, it will frighten the students away

Assessment validation, a process of peer checking to ensure assessment tasks are appropriate to meeting unit learning outcomes, is another relatively recent audit requirement that teachers appear to spend much time on. One teacher commented that the assessments:

> just sit in a drawer, just in case, in case an auditor comes around. So, I don't know what the educational value of it is. Maybe there is some, I don't know, but essentially we're doing it because we might get audited

De-motivating and de-professionalising effects: Tensions between the logics of audit requirements and the logics of professional expertise

The comments of many teachers suggest that perhaps the most significant aspect of trying to be audit compliant is the effect it has on their professionalism, on them being good teachers. Reinforcing a point reported on previously (Black 2009a: 23-24), head teachers found they have little time left after their administrative work on audits to prepare for their own classes and provide a leadership role for their teachers. As one head teacher commented:

> In fact, I'm probably the worst teacher in the section as far as lesson preparation and that sort of thing goes. My teachers prepare all my notes for me and tell me what I'm doing each week ... I don't do the sort of lesson preparation I used to do as a teacher. I just don't get time.

In time, the constant pressures for compliance, usually involving repetitive, tedious administrative tasks, has the negative effect of wearing teachers down and reducing their capacity for doing what they regard as the really valuable educational work that they should be doing. As one head teacher from an Access section commented:

> There isn't time to do anything creative anymore. I don't have enough time to access the community and really put together something very creative and innovative, because you have in mind you want to spend your time doing this, and then you just get consumed with the electronic systems, troubleshooting and the minutia of recording and whatever, repetition, and creativity never happens, and you are just exhausted, and sometimes you think, what have I done today? Yet another week's gone by and I haven't been out to see the courses running out in the community, which is where I should be ... and making those connections and networks. It's very frustrating

Comments such as the above were all too familiar. Head teachers in particular, feeling the informal pressures to be "pro-active," claimed they simply didn't have the time. Typically, one head teacher said:

> All I'm doing is reacting to everything that comes across the desk and I'd love to be able to set new things up and look at new ways of delivering the course, but I'm flat out trying to keep up with the right assessment, the correct assessment for the right unit, so, that's what the auditors want to see when they come in. But I'd rather spend the time getting a better way of teaching.

Different ways of responding to audits: deniers, pragmatists, compliers

As indicated in the literature review above, people respond differently to audits, with some being unwilling to comply (see Gleeson & Shain 1999 cited in Avis 2007:100) and others developing different forms of resistance. So too with respondents in this research study. Some head teachers and teachers appeared to deny the importance of being audit compliant relative to other aspects of their work role. One head teacher, for example, stated that he often didn't comply because he simply had no time, and that if something was really important it would be brought to his attention:

> To be quite honest, I'm not that concerned. If they find me wanting they can spend the money and fix me up. I haven't got time to worry, and if I did get audited I could be in a fair bit of trouble. The bottom line is, I haven't got the time ... If it's important, it'll come down again or someone will see me about it. I do toss a lot out ...

Another teacher was quite adamant she would not be spending her time unnecessarily on audit compliance and she was prepared to subvert the process. She said simply, 'I just tick everything'. In response to a question on whether she feels an obligation to meet the stated learning outcomes of the curriculum, she stated, 'I don't. Give me a box, I'll tick the box, I'll tick it'. It should be pointed out, however, that she justified her actions as a principled response to having outcomes and curriculum imposed on her which she believed were not necessarily in the best interests of the students. This is a typical example of the tensions between audit requirements and professional judgement.

Many teachers did try to meet at least part of their audit requirements, but often this appeared more of a pragmatic response. It was something they thought had to be done, but they were clear it would not interfere with the "real" learning. Typical of this response was the following:

> I'll be honest with you, I'll throw in an assessment, but ... my assessments are specifically aimed to keep that side of things happy. I'll do it in one session, tick the boxes. But the rest of the time I'll do what's needed

Within this "pragmatic" response, sometimes the compliance aspects appeared almost to be an afterthought. One teacher stated that half way through a lesson she might think, 'oh my God, I should have done dah, dah, dah, dah and dah, so I will do something that will fit the criteria'. Such a response, however, might still be regarded a subversion of the audit process because, while in a technical sense there was compliance, it was not undertaken in the full spirit of the audit process.

Finally, of course, there are those who do comply, the many TAFE teachers who try to do what is officially required of them. For some of these teachers, there is clearly a difficult balance between their own professional beliefs and judgements and those imposed on them as part of the audit process. For example, one teacher was asked why she didn't just tick the boxes anyway. She replied: 'I probably could, but some things I just can't, I've got to do some things related to it, even if it's one lesson'. In other words, she felt she had to be truthful to the prescribed outcomes and curriculum. As another teacher commented, 'You can get caught in it because you feel like, you know, you'll get into trouble'.

Conclusions

As we stated in the introduction, this paper represents an initial exploration of the audit culture in TAFE which has received relatively little attention in the research literature on

VET in Australia. The insights provided by head teachers and teachers in this paper focus on these issues and signal that audit compliance in TAFE is an issue worthy of greater attention.

The research literature indicates that audits can be viewed as mechanisms of control and management. In the case of TAFE, audits serve to regulate the activities of teachers by systems of surveillance of the delivery of education and training developed by peak industry groups (via training packages) and government. The range of audits in TAFE is extensive, dealing not only with specific curriculum aspects of educational delivery, but with management systems generally, covering all areas of physical, financial and human resource management. The qualitative data presented in this paper indicate that many head teachers and teachers feel overwhelmed by the "paperwork" generated by audits, and the time and effort spent on ensuring compliance can reduce their effectiveness as teaching professionals. As indicated in other recent studies of head teachers in TAFE (i.e. Black 2009a, 2009b, Rice 2005), these aspects of audits have serious implications for the development of the new professional identities now expected of VET teachers, especially in relation to teachers being more entrepreneurial, innovative and creative.

The qualitative data show that not all TAFE teachers willingly comply with audits, with a continuum of responses ranging from a tokenistic "tick-the-box" to full compliance. Many of the head teachers' and teachers' comments reflected an ongoing tension between the logics and technical requirements of audits and the logics of their professional expertise, a questioning of the educational value. Significantly, professional agency is reflected strongly in many of the teacher responses, clearly indicating the needs of their students are their primary concern, and audit compliance becomes a secondary consideration if it is perceived to run counter to or does not fully meet student needs. The extent of such qualified audit compliance, however, requires further research, especially as some of the respondents featured in this paper were from Access sections (e.g. Adult Basic Education, Outreach) which may differ from TAFE generally in terms of their professional backgrounds and pedagogical principles and orientations.

Overall, however, the role of audits in the working lives of TAFE teachers appears significant on the basis of the data presented in this paper. But consideration must also be given to respondent demographics, given they (head teachers and full time Access teachers) were primarily older, experienced practitioners, and many of them expressed adjustment problems in the transformation of their work to incorporate an audit culture. For teachers new to TAFE there may be less of a transformation required. As one Access teacher commented, 'the induction for a new teacher is: here are your learning outcomes, this is your CLAMS (electronic) roll, and these are what you tick off for assessment validation'. This begs the question, however, is this the sort of audit-driven pedagogy we really want in TAFE?

Acknowledgement

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