

WHO'S LISTENING, WHO CARES?

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ABSTRACT

Professionalism and the current national interest in vocational education give AVETRA legitimacy. But have we made a difference? Issues that inhibit and enhance the value of research are discussed as well as how to communicate research results to achieve higher effectiveness of research outcomes.

Introduction

AVETRA has been given legitimacy by our interest, initiative and the national concern with vocational education. But have we really made a difference? Who is listening to us, who cares? Are governments, their agencies, vocational educational institutions, taking note of our work? If the answer is not many, what do we do? We should answer this question before others ask it in a less than collegiate atmosphere. As a consequence, this paper highlights a number of issues that influence the acceptance of current VET research.

It is important we have vision. It may be only us who can offer real solutions and not band-aids or palliatives in the current socioeconomic circumstances. To make this difference we should continuously note ways of becoming astute activists, promoting discoveries in, and observations about vocational education while continuing as resourceful researchers, in an area that is too important to leave to chance or less experienced players.

The World and the Research Context

What is the context of our work? It is an empiricist world categorised by ideology and utilitarianism, where economic rationalism is a panacea with 19th Century factory style answers to 20th Century needs. It is a world where efficiency practises seek to circumscribe everything from government and commerce to schools and hospitals. People are acknowledged more for their utility and less for their social value; we are all for sale. While many decision makers acknowledge faults in current ways of managing the economy, work and the general well being of the population, they seem incapable shifting to a more human model (Colebatch 1998, 13).

Slattery notes just how profound the changes to our the world are:

The changes under way in our intellectual world are as profound as any experienced by the [19th Century] Victorians: the weakening of disciplinary boundaries, the call for more socially engaged curriculum, disputes over the nature of truth, and over and above it the explosion of knowledge, or at least information. If we are to believe that great sage of post-colonial studies, Edward Said, we are in the midst of a near-Copernican intellectual revolution (Slattery 1998, 13).

This quote highlight's what many currently experience. Life is hard yet remains rewarding for many, albeit perhaps intellectually rather than financially. The question iterated here is a perennial one that most social science researchers ask: is our research heeded? One answer is that it depends on the type of research and what it is designed to do.

Modes of Research

Some research informs while other types intend to initiate change. Vielle in Reimers and McGuinn (1981, 81) described four legitimate research models within the social sciences. The list is by no means complete:

Academic research: uses a rigorous testing of a hypothesis based on one or more concepts to find if and how well, some system, model or theory is viable or working. It helps people understand why things are the way they are. This type of research we would expect decision-makers to 'note'-that is, incorporate it into their general conceptualisation of VET.

Planning research: is often used by policy makers and attempts to answer questions that seek to find what factors will be likely to produce a desired result. It tries to generate patterns, often using statistics to ascertain the relationship between variables. If policy makers value this sort of research we would expect results to be acted upon or at least a response explaining why no action was taken.

Instrumental research: is that which frequently uses trial and error experiments to discover factors that produce a desired result. It asks the question, What if...? It may involve leaps of faith but it incorporates notions of rigour and control. Here decision-makers and practitioners to demonstrate through practice what they have learnt from our findings.

Action research: uses direct interventions in a real life setting to achieve specific changes. It aims at improvement where the objectives are outcomes. It may lack rigour but doing what seems right may be more important than a learned trial, or experimentation with checks on validity. Here we would want to see some follow up or longer-term evaluative work undertaken.

The Hazards in Selecting a Research Topic

Prior methodology selection is the choice of research topic. If we are contracted this will hardly be an issue, though whether we want the contract is affected by our interests and capabilities. But in independent research who chooses the topic? Are we researching in the right areas, or are we being led by our interests, fashion, or serendipity and not the needs of our audience? In a recent paper reviewing Anderson (1997) on training markets Robinson (1998) wrote:

...there has been a lot of commentary on the issue of training markets, very often motivated by the particular philosophical stance of the authors (or, more correctly commentators). What is missing is a body of dispassionate and analytical research into actual effects of training markets in Australia (Robinson 1998, 8).

and

An example of the 'missing' factor in research is a general absence of data, both qualitative and statistical, on the implications for public and private provider balance (Robinson 1998, 10).

Robinson (1998, 13) additionally notes some specific research gaps by quoting Kearn (1997). These included research on flexible delivery including its practice and barriers to its practice, as well as adult learning principles, economic and social principles for lifelong learning, delivery modes and/or the implications for training outcomes. Robinson also cites Docking (1997) on the low level of hard research in the area of competency-based assessments, for example, there is almost no data on the quantity, scope, and quality of training received by those undertaking competency-based assessments. Also noted was a need for research on the relationship of individual learning style to assessment.

The field of quality was an additional area noted by Robinson who commented:

...there is a need to evaluate the range of [quality assurance] approaches being adopted within the [VET] sector before any one approach can be recommended (Robinson 1998, 15).

Should researchers be totally led by those funding VET research, no matter how well formed their vision, as noted by Anderson and Biddle (1991, 5)? The answer is no. There must always be room for independent research, those willing to follow a hunch or act on inspiration flashes on what might be a useful field of investigation. This can lead to innovation; it can also lead to professional obscurity.

Credibility of the Researcher and the Nature of the Audience

An impediment to having research noted, and perhaps seeing it acted on is that teaching is generally considered a low status profession. This in turn affects the credibility of VET research done by educators with an education focus in favour of that which has an economic, management or business orientation. As a result, research can become highly politicised where often-traditional researchers in the field are perceived as slow to respond, and therefore out of touch, to the needs of implementers. Decision-makers do understand relative demands but they too are under pressure meeting tight government time lines and budgets. This means that decisions are based on general impressions of what is needed, perhaps assisted by an inquiry or two, or reports, and not on valid research findings. This can be seen in the world of VET over the last ten years in Britain as well as Australia where major changes have been introduced based largely on ideology, the perceptions of industry and the new bureaucracy, but not through the influence of thoughtful work by education researchers.

There appears to be also a subtext that controllers of the national VET system want only the good news and are highly defensive of any criticism or critique. There seems to be an atmosphere that there is more interest in visions of the system than its perfection in an applied work/industry context, and that truth may be expensive, troublesome or an irrelevance. As Barnsley wrote in 1998:

The attention of the individual is caught and held by many contradictory "Truths", via advertising, the press, television, the Internet etc., concerning religion, art, medical health, products and politics; the individual literally does not know what to believe, and may internally reconcile the contradictory "Facts" by no longer accepting universal truth, and instead accepting their own "Opinion" as fact. Examples are provided by the fierce debates over abortion, evolution vs creation theories, global warming, and the so-called science debate between the social constructivists and scientists... (Barnsley 1998, 2).

In such circumstances researchers have to decide what is truth, then display it as findings to groups who, if they don't like the proffered version of facts will find others more suited to their political, economic and social vision. This leads to another outcome of economic rationalism where applied research is favoured at the expense of the implicit value of basic inquiry. Cartwright, in Anderson and Biddle (1991), suggests that this activity is misplaced and in a social science context, if research funds were reapplied to fundamental research as distinct from applied research:

...there is no reason to conclude from past experience that methodological improvements would be retarded (Cartwright in Anderson and Biddle 1991, 24)

Another aspect of research is the assumption researchers make about how an audience will use their work. It might be quite different from the researcher's intention:

Evidence suggests that government officials use research less to arrive at solutions than to orientate themselves to problems. They use research to help them think about issues and define the problematics of a situation, to gain new ideas and new perspectives for future policy actions (McCormick Adams, Smelser and Treiman 1991, 32).

It is this process of 'seepage' that can change the whole government social agenda over time.

The Nature of Organisations

The platform of our work is the organisation. Organisations are not to be taken at face value, as they are complex human arrangements. One way to understand them so a researcher can deal them with better is to consider them as a form of theatre where research aids the performance. Bolman and Deal (1998) assert that theatre in organisations is an essential state and is a mask for real activities, as they often do not do the work they are supposed to and may be quite dysfunctional:

The idea that there can be activities without results casts doubt on a substantial proportion of human endeavour. At first glance such a heresy might seem wholly negative...

Organisational structures, activities, and events are more than simply instrumental. They are part of the organisational theatre, an ongoing expressive drama that entertains, creates meaning, and portrays the organisation to itself.

Internal theatre also plays to an audience outside the organisation. It signals to the outside world that all is well (Bolman and Deal 1998, 94).

This description presents no problem for research as it fills a confirmatory role in many cases.

Organisations need to undertake evaluations if they are to be viewed as responsible, serious, and well managed, even though the results of evaluations are rarely used for decision making. Evaluations are used for other purposes. Evaluation data can be used as a weapon in political battles or as justification for decisions that would have been made in any event. Evaluation fosters belief, confidence, and support from external constituencies and benefactors (Bolman and Deal 1994, 102).

This statement would be as justified if the words evaluation and evaluator were replaced with research and researcher.

Does this point of view incapacitate researchers? No; there should be honesty with balance as to how an organisation might use research. This should not threaten researcher integrity. It does mean the researcher should constantly listen to the research host and be prepared to use diplomacy but never compromise.

The evaluation process often takes the form of high drama. Prestigious evaluators are hired, and the process receives considerable publicity...

New roles [the theatre metaphor again] are enacted: evaluators ask penetrating questions, and respondents give answers that portray the world as it is supposed to be...

Occasionally, an evaluator blows the whistle by producing a highly critical report [an absence of diplomacy?]. The drama then becomes a tragedy that is often injurious to both parties. (Bolman and Deal 1994, 102).

Here is a guide to research if it is to be effective, whether by supplying a particular answer or by adding to the pool of knowledge. It should be a non-direct assault for in research we are telling a story, not real life. It may contain some truths that implicitly suggest a plan for action, but it is rarely the truth. This view is supported by Davis and Maxcey (1998) who wrote in their definition of Post-modernism (Post-modernism being modernity without the illusions).

...research methods were fraught with emotion, intuition, imagination and qualitative judgement (Davis and Maxcey 1998, 2).

Another perhaps more conventional way of looking at organisations is to think of them as systems.

One of the common characteristics about organisations is they are open social systems that have a requirement for two things according to Daft and Weick (1994, 71-89). The first is to obtain information; the second is how to interpret it. The way an organisation gathers and processes information is in three stages, first by scanning (data collection), then by interpretation (data is given meaning) and finally by learning (demonstrated by taking action). Research can often fill gaps in stages one and two. How information is collected depends on the type of organisation. Daft and Weick describe four of these: enacting, discovering, conditioned viewing and undirected viewing. Each will handle data from sources such as research, in different ways. One characteristic common to each model is the belief their operational environment is unanalysable- an enigma.

Enacting style organisations have an active interventionist approach to their environment trying to construct it to suit themselves. They do this by experimenting, testing and ignoring what has gone before. They try and develop new products and create a market for them. In the current context it could be that ANTA falls into this category with New Apprenticeships and Training Packages being the innovative products.

Discovering style organisations are also intruders into their environment. They survive by detecting solutions through research or other probes sent into the environment. A research-focussed university is an example of this style organisation. It works at the frontiers of many knowledge fields searching for answers. The style of research it prefers is highly valid, ethically correct, logical and conservative.

Conditioned viewing organisations prefer standardised data collection from traditional sources. They make the assumption, sometimes to their cost, that the environment is benevolent. This style of organisation often takes the form of large industry or industry bodies. Research may be logical, outwardly useful but not valid in the classic sense.

Undirected viewing organisations try not to be intrusive in data gathering tending to rely on informal and personal networks. Examples of this organisation are those found in medium to small industry. Research often takes the form of expert committees of inquiry with government, industry or even self-appointed members, for example ITABs, formulating likely solutions to problems. Research often

depends on existing statistics and knowledge, experience, networks and folklore, where any academic inputs may be discounted or considered irrelevant.

Matching the mode of research to the organisational type is prudent. For example, enacting and discovering style organisations might be expected to prefer academic, planning and instrumental forms of research. On the other hand conditioned and undirected viewing organisations may be more sympathetic to instrumental and action forms of inquiry.

Communicating the Results

In communicating results the prime vehicle is still the written word. Some types of writing do not help the VET debate while others do. Here is an example of each, the first is on the topic of regional VET, it has a style of comment typical of some of semi-official government journalese:

The project (*title deleted*) examines whether models of vocational provision constructed to service one sector, as opposed to mutualities of sectors, may mitigate against attempts by non-metropolitan Australian communities to reposition themselves economically and socially in a globalised economy. If so, a more inclusive definition of vocational education and training may more accurately describe the true value of such activity and its benefits to communities in their quest for economic and social sustainability (ANTA 1998, 22)

This example allows the power of the message to be lost in complex words. In its defence, writing such as this often is not plain because it has to satisfy a number of purposes, but nonetheless a simple message has been made obscure. This is not rare nor is it confined to official publications. It might have been better if simpler expression was used allowing the reader the opportunity to create multi-word synergies of precise and elegant meaning such as that suggested by this quote:

In its report on the VET system in Finland, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 1995) identifies several advantages of moving towards a national higher education model which incorporates separate systems of university and non-university institutions offering academic and vocational education respectively. In particular, it highlights the increased diversity, flexibility and responsiveness to changing industry and community needs that a dual system potentially offers. Conversely, equally strong arguments could be mounted on social grounds for developing an integrated system of higher education in which the distinction between academic and vocational education is blurred (Anderson 1998, 29).

In this instance synergies are developed by simple ideas, clearly stated, that are likely to promote discussion and address questions such as: What would such a VET system look like in Australia? Is such a model better than the current one? The debate might be interesting, intense and productive, something not possible in response to the first quote on account of its vagueness.

On writing and style Strunk is quoted in Strunk and White (1979):

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his [or her] sentences short, or that he [or she] avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell (Strunk and White 1979, xv).

Finally, at the end of the research comes the report, the aggregation of results. Never forget its importance and purpose. Final reports are not only for reading, part of their function is to justify the expense of the research, providing physical evidence of a completed task. Sometimes their sheer bulk is enough to impress, serving a political purpose quite separate from research goals. It is also evidence of a researcher's ability. However, final reports may not produce the outcome imagined by the researcher. On the other hand, short interim reports are better for disseminating findings, and a one or two page information memo dropped on the right desk can enhance a researcher's reputation and project outcomes immeasurably. Stopping by an office of the host with some hot, not yet printed, information has the same function. Giving out information at mandatory reporting dates is often no more than ritual. The overriding rule in reporting is to give people tools not tomes.

Conclusion

Who's listening? Who cares? Who knows? But if VET practitioners and researchers do not learn to use the right strategies, politics and languages the answer will be no one of significance.

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