

The Seductive Hope of Education Work

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ABSTRACT

When educators talk about the changing nature of work, it is common for them to think about these changes as happening to other industries, and to other people. However, the changing nature of work has important consequences for educational workers, and has serious implications for VET policy and practices. In this paper, I draw on insights developed during a four year research project with adult educators living and working in the Greater Western Suburbs (Sydney), during which I developed knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon of educational work in the 1990s. I critically examine the contradictions that exist for these workers, and consider the implications of these tensions for those 'at the top' of the educational continuum.

INTRODUCTION

Adult educational workers know very little about each other's pay and working conditions. When they come together, as we have done at this AVETRA Conference, they talk about all sorts of interesting things — but they almost never talk about the kind of sick leave entitlements they have, or the hourly rate they are paid. They might, over morning tea, compare notes about this year's restructuring experience, poke fun at the latest manager, and generally share outrage about the direction of public education. But for various reasons, talk of 'teaching' and 'learning' is judiciously compartmentalised from talk of 'conditions', almost as if they are two disconnected arterial roads, maybe not even heading in the same direction. In this discussion, I want to bring these two roads together, to argue that they are inextricably connected, and to look at the bumps.

POLARISATION IS PERSONAL

It's become quite common for papers about education reform to begin by talking about globalisation. This talk often refers to changes such as the rise of neo-liberal ideologies and marketisation (Marginson 1993) through mechanisms such as competition policy (Anderson 1997). It also includes discussions about structural change, the polarisation of wealth and advantage, and labour market reforms such as work intensification and rising casualisation (Jackson 1996). Whilst I do intend to restate the basic tenets of this argument, for the purposes of this paper I want to focus briefly on polarisation, and then to consider some of the consequences of labour market reform for adult education workers.

What is meant by polarisation? Polarisation is the redistribution of wealth upwards, and the emergence of what has come to be called 'the working poor'. Put simply, rich people have become richer, and poor people have become poorer, and this has occurred as a national as well as an international phenomenon (Brecher & Costello 1994). This shift of wealth is not just about money. It's also about living conditions, working conditions, access to decision-making, resources and processes of determination. Specifically, in relation to the issues I want to discuss in this paper, the shift is away from secure permanent and stable (male) working cultures to something else. I say 'something else' for the same reason that Tickell & Peck (1995) talk about 'after fordism' rather than post-fordism — we are too much in the midst of change to be sure at this point about where we are going. However, enough is known about the direction of change to be able to state that increasingly casualised work and a regendered labour force (Jackson 1996) have replaced secure male employment.

When these claims are made in the media, it's been easy to imagine that the polarisation of wealth is something that has taken place somewhere else, and to someone else. In everyday reality, it probably has happened to us. It's become personal. By doing nothing much at all except begin a career pathway twenty years ago as a teacher in a public school, I am now 'permanently' employed in a job where I now earn a salary in the top 10% of the Australian labour market. I say 'permanently' in inverted commas because, as a result of the research I've done during the past five years, and as changes to public institutions catch up to me, I now feel insecure. I'm not absolutely certain, as I was

five years ago, that my job really is safe, and I say this as a tenured lecturer. Such a statement was once unthinkable.

It has also become personal for other education workers. As competition policy reshapes the face of the education industry, as the boundaries between institutions are weakened, and as the distinctions between public and private are eroded, education workers increasingly compete within the same industry 'space' for employment. This leads to a continuum of employment experiences and different levels of advantage and disadvantage for those employed in the industry.

VOICES 'FROM THE BOTTOM'

Polarisation implies a 'top' and a 'bottom'. If I am amongst the top 10% of income earners then below me lies 90% of other people. When I first began to do research about the adult education worker phenomenon, I did not expect to be talking to participants at AVETRA about their wages and conditions. I expected to be talking about my recommendations for making sure that educators remain critical and experimental. During 1994-1998, as I researched educational work with over 80 participants living and working in western Sydney, I came to see that it is not only unrealistic, but also negligent, to talk about 'teaching practice without at the same time talking about teaching conditions. Through a series of four qualitative studies that drew on the approaches developed by researchers such as Haug (1987) and Lather (1992), I created a space in which the voices of those working at the sharp edge of systemic reforms in western Sydney provided insights and understanding about educational work.

During the research, I asked participants about their experiences of work as educators during the 1990s. Although their answers were diverse, the following was suggested. At the sharp edge of educational work, it was increasingly difficult to gain access to full-time secure employment. The word 'permanent' was unlikely to be in their lexicon. Many worked under contract, and it was likely that the contract was for less than a year, and was be routinely extended or ended. Contracts were unpredictable, and tenuous. Others worked as casuals, and although such work was a core wage activity, the 'just a casual' syndrome was alive and well.

A continuum of employment experiences existed, and these are shown in Figure 1, below.

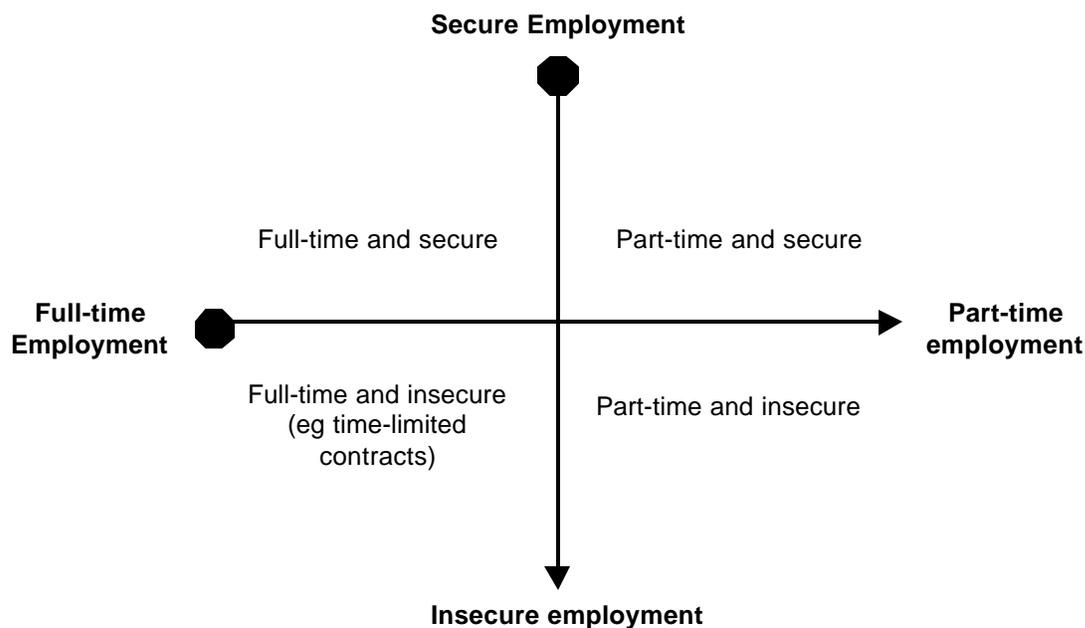


Figure 1: Continuum of employment experiences.

The direction of the continuum was towards insecure and part-time employment. Yet the desire of participants was towards secure employment, whether full-time or part-time. Many were employed full-time, in work that was based in the lower right and lower left quadrants. That is, they were employment full-time in part-time casual positions or full-time contract positions. Multi-income streaming was common. The hope of full-time work in TAFE had died, and during the past two years, participants became increasingly adept at chameleon behaviour: today a builder, tomorrow a literacy teacher, the next day an employment consultant.

In my research, the average income for education workers was \$37,000. Beneath this average however, lay a polarised spread between \$70,000 (for a handful of corporate trainer/managers) and a much larger number of workers who typically earned between \$13 — \$35 per hour, although the latter sum was only earned by part-time TAFE teachers. As adult educational work is so diverse and notoriously difficult to define, no national benchmark or standard wage exists for this type of labour. Educational workers were paid under such mechanisms as a trade award (for example, if they were tradespeople who moved 'up' into training roles), a state award, a national award, a TAFE award, or if they were self-employed, the sum allocated in a contract.

With the exception of managers, and those workers with a 'traditional' full-time and permanent profile, research participants often had quite limited access to decision-making and control. They did not see themselves as regular members of teams, had poor access to planned on-the-job training, were poorly resourced, and were generally (and increasingly) expected to contribute unpaid labour to their workplaces. Unpaid labour included attending meetings, unpaid preparation time and writing tender documents in the hope that it would secure future employment. For some, periods of unemployment juxtaposed periods of intensive over-work and hyper-activity, especially associated with periods when funding was received, or new government policies demanded rapid change. Their desire, however, was to have greater access to decision-making, teams and other forms of workplace participation.

THE SEDUCTIVE HOPE OF EDUCATION WORK

The research suggested that the creation of the Open Training Market gave rise to the seductive hope that education work provided a new source of rewarding white-collar employment. Participants in the research had become educators for many reasons, but their decision to remain as educators was underpinned by a hope that the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards could be great, and that they would be involved in meaningful work that 'made a difference'. Six key contradictions characterised the seductive hope of education work, and I discuss these below.

Contradiction One: Enablement and Constraint

It was common for participants to express two competing views of their experiences as education workers and reflected a tension between enablement and constraint. For example, the following hopes and experiences coexisted:

- I hope for greater financial reward AND I have limited or no access to promotion, a stable career, or a minimum educational wage.
- Qualifications will improve my chances of survival in the organisation ('one organisation' employees) or the labour market (contingency workers). AND My experiences show that qualifications do not protect people from the impersonal and haphazard effects of downsizing.
- Teams are empowering. AND I have no access to teams.

A strong belief in the personal and transformative potential of the educator (enablement statements) was juxtaposed against a lived reality that was regulated, insecure and at times uncaring, indifferent and/or rigid (constraint statements) for some workers, or rewarding, exciting and fulfilling for others (enablement statements).

Contradiction Two: Flexibility and Insecurity

The second contradiction was expressed as a tension between an ongoing belief in the story of 'flexibility' as an ideal, and the lived experience of 'flexibility'. The ideal of 'flexibility' was associated with two aspects of education work — working hours and teaching methodology. In relation to working hours, 'flexibility' was often translated into:

- insecure work

- hours worked in an unpaid capacity where the educator was flexible in determining the boundaries around 'paid' and 'unpaid' labour
- deregulated hours
- role flexibility and skills diversification
- rapid and flexible responses to changing funding agendas and ideology
- gaining credentials to meet the changing requirements of curriculum accreditation

The degree of contradiction was often experienced in relationship to the quality of the employment environment. Some were rigid or impersonal; some conveyed a sense of powerlessness in the face of pressure from 'the government'. Only a small number were clearly committed to reciprocal flexibility — that is, the employer who was willing to provide flexibility in return for flexibility. Despite this, throughout the research it was rare for participants to 'pin-point' the employer as the determining body for working conditions. The employer was effectively protected from taking responsibility for employment policies. Such an analysis was deflected to 'the government'. An alternative view was never suggested. For example, it was never suggested that an employer could choose:

- to pay above award rates
- pay for overtime
- choose higher award rates (there are many for education workers)
- pay for training in kind or cash, or
- provide career pathways for contingency workers.

Thus, many education workers talked about 'flexibility' simultaneously in multiple terms that were contradictory.

1. 'flexible learning' as:

- inflexible pre-packaged curricula, rules and regulations
- responsive to local student needs
- exciting and demanding
- frustrating and stultifying

2. 'flexible employment' as:

- work intensification or work insecurity
- working time that suited family commitments
- exciting and demanding

3. 'flexibility' as:

- a complex spiral between self-exploitation and professional achievement
- a balance between coercion and pleasure.

Contradiction Three: Team Belonging and Longing

Three experiences of belonging characterised the third contradiction. These were: the ideal of 'belonging', longing to belong, 'belonging'.

Most participants who were employed as contingency workers would have preferred to work in one, secure position at a time, even if it did not mean a full-time job. A desire for continuity formed part of these participant's aspirations. At the beginning of the research in 1994, this aspiration was tied largely to a desire to work for TAFE NSW. By the end of 1998, the desire was for stable work, even if it had to be found across a number of employers.

For some participants, the desire to belong was a driving force behind completing the degree. Belonging was not just to an employer, but to a professional identity and to an ethos of white-collar work and 'a lifestyle oriented career'. The desire for belonging, combined with loyalty to students and the aims of education and training, enticed some participants to make voluntary contributions to the employer organisation. For example by developing resources to be shared with other staff, by establishing web pages during unpaid time, by up-skilling in areas useful to the organisation, and by providing professional services such as training and development for staff, without recompense. At the same time, those participants who did 'belong' to one organisation, expressed a range of positions about their attitude to employment. Others 'belonged' after a restructure where former work-mates

were made redundant. For some reason — and it was interesting to note that it was not clear to them why — they had survived a restructure. Others did not 'belong' in that they had witnessed restructuring, were suspicious of their employer, and to varying degrees had suspended expressions of loyalty and commitment to the employer.

Those who had chosen contingency work as a strategy for achieving flexibility (males as well as females), were:

- more likely to have less access to flexible teaching environments
- less able to take risks, or determine educational ideals
- less free to make decisions, simply because of the pragmatic result of lack of continuity and time one workplace, therefore
- less able to contribute outside the constraints of regulation.

Participants in this position experienced a paradox — the more willing they were to be flexible (work patterns) the less able they were to be flexible (work practices).

Contradiction Four: Doors and Walls

Unresolved, simultaneous and contradictory myths about the organisation characterised the fourth set of tensions, and I have called these the 'Brick Wall' view and the 'Open Door' view. The 'Open Door' was the ideal workplace that participants had read about and heard about. This was a workplace where workers had access to decision-making and control and to rich intrinsic and extrinsic rewards. The 'Brick Wall' view was the lived experience of the organisation. The logic of the 'working out' of this contradiction can be summarised by the following statements:

- enterprise was rarely rewarded extrinsically — but I live in hope
- access to decision-making (beyond the immediate boundaries of the classroom) was often limited to full-time 'one organisation' employees — but it might be extended if I come up with really good ideas
- the development of new skills was rarely fostered on-the-job by employers — but they might reward new skills I develop elsewhere
- the breaking down of boundaries rarely occurred — but my creativity often compensates for rigidity
- reward was intrinsic rather than in the form of above award wages, career pathways, security, or professional development — but 'the government' created this climate, and my employer has no choice.

Contradiction Five: Loyalty and Fear

The fifth set of contradictory tensions was expressed between three types of loyalty — loyalty to a career, an employer, an ideal, and between loyalty and the various everyday experiences of work. Loyalty to 'the government' and to 'educational ideals' was often based on a job-satisfaction-commitment model and the workplace authority model (Adler & Adler 1998). That is, loyalty was based on both the intrinsic reward of education work as well as a belief 'in the legitimacy of the employer's exercise of authority' (p.31).

Stories were told, however, of the tension between loyalty and fear. On one level, only one participant indicated that her employer expressed loyalty to her. Loyalty was then, a one-way phenomenon. Other participants were afraid that they would lose their employment, and this constructed loyalty in important ways. Morag, for example, had a great deal of loyalty to the ideals of the training reform agenda, and therefore to her clients and employers, but at the same time was fearful of unemployment. Morag believed in the power of education and training and career flexibility, and was highly motivated to promote it to her clients. 'I never want to go back to when I was so low, I had no choices' was one aspect of her story, and another was that 'the realisation of my potential is demonstrated by my transition from traditional employment (as a nurse) to a lifestyle oriented career'.

The loyalty/fear contradiction:

- constrained rule-breaking and risk-taking
- silenced the recognition of exploitative employment practices
- lead some education workers to exit education work, or leave particular employers
- entrenched self-exploitation

- constrained the discovery of alternative action-scenarios
- led to high levels of motivation and engagement, even for contingency workers with low hours per week
- stimulated creativity.

Contradiction Six: Opportunism and Exploitation

The final contradiction was expressed as a tension between opportunism and exploitation. In this research, 'opportunism' took two forms. Firstly, it was expressed as a practise of adapting actions to circumstances (Macquarie Dictionary, *ibid*, p.1216) where the source of resources changed. For example, participants did this by:

- learning computer skills
- gaining multiple credentials on order to teach an increasing number of accredited programs
- being available at odd times, and for short or long periods of employment

Secondly, it was also the practice of entrepreneurship. Participants 'pursued opportunities' (Ropo & Hunt 1995, 9) by:

- establishing a small business for teaching the use of computers to people in their homes
- developing credentials and expertise for potential, rather than actual employment
- identifying a problem in an organisation and developing solutions to solve it, without resources, and not necessarily in response to a specific request by the employer/manager
- entering a tender process as an unpaid employee, sole trader or owner manager
- developing skills and networks for employment in fashionable educational trends
- role diversification.

Both types of opportunism were common, however the popular notion of the entrepreneur (someone who is dynamic, takes risks, develops high-profit products) was not a feature of participants' enterprising behaviours. In addition, participants did not have access to the 'high flying' work and financial rewards often associated with entrepreneurship.

Balanced against opportunism, was the experience of exploitation (Sargent & Matthews 1999, 213). Participants told stories that indicated their willingness to self-exploit. They were prepared to engage in work intensification, unpaid work, and poorly paid and insecure work for many different reasons. Participants did not talk about 'employer exploitation', but nevertheless such exploitation occurred. For example:

- unpaid work hours to write tender documents for the organisation
- unpaid preparation hours (contingency workers)
- minimal allowance for preparation hours (full-time one organisation employees)
- asking workers to share expertise without recompense
- work intensification without a clear indication that such work would protect the educator from future job loss
- annually requiring contract employees to re-apply for their jobs
- adhering to the lowest minimum award wage
- relying on the resources provided by the educator
- relying on, and benefiting from, self-motivated skills development without providing training or a training budget
- claiming the intellectual property of contingency workers
- lack of transparency in employment practices, including the way in which part-time contingency workers were allocated a share of casual hours.

Exploitation was not limited to contingency workers. Kell, Balatti, Hill and Muspratt (1997) have argued that, in the case of full-time TAFE teachers in Queensland, the pressure towards change has resulted in a 'willingness to self exploit' (p.19), chronic overload and stress, lack of direction, and a survival mode (p.20).

CONFRONTING HOPE

There has always been a pool of casuals working at the margins of adult education work. The movement of insecure work from the margin to the centre of employment practices in the Open

Training Market in western Sydney represents a point of continuity with previous practices. This shift has implications for the capacity of the industry to construct a hopeful future for all those involved.

From our positions 'at the top', educational researchers often develop research and recommendations that we truly expect will be implemented by those 'at the bottom', but without much understanding about what that actually means. Many education workers in this research had poor access to decision-making and control, inadequate rewards, and often endured unimaginative management practices and endless systemic reforms with considerable energy and hope. Their capacity to be critical, creative and enthusiastic exceeded to capacity of the education industry to utilise such a potential resource. The 'just a casual' syndrome was alive and well, and had occupied a permanent place at the heart of employment practices. Such a situation can be seen as counter-productive and as a threat to the development of professional capabilities, risk-taking and experimentation in this industry.

Such a view provides a starting point for a quest for better stories, such as a focus by researchers on enlightened employment and management practices, rather than solely on better teaching technologies. The self-motivated hope of exploited education workers is a sad and inadequate cornerstone of future education work.

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