Torquing up TAFE teacher traction through a critical spirit discourse

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Abstract

This paper reports on research conducted with TAFE teachers from Queensland and Western Australia. The research is located at the intersection where these teachers' identities met with the discourse of new vocationalism. Scholars have highlighted the tensions that this discourse has produced in the relationships between TAFE and its teachers, and noted that TAFE teachers are pressured to change their subjectivities to better reflect themselves as workers in an educational market focused on economic imperatives, as opposed to notions of themselves as liberal educators, with a focus on lifelong learning, personal transformation, collaborative relationships and social responsibility. This research was driven by the possibility that the concept of 'critical spirit' might provide a means for TAFE teachers to gain traction, and to stand their ground in relation to the continued terraforming (or is that terror forming?) of the TAFE teacher terrain produced by the adoption of the new vocational discourse.

This interpretative research was conceptualised by synthesising sociocultural perspectives of discourse as a reality building tool, with notions of critical thinker dispositions referred to as critical spirit. Using a discourse analysis methodology, selected TAFE teacher artefacts were analysed. This research extended previous findings of a critical spirit discourse manifest within TAFE teacher case narrative artefacts (Tyler, 2008) by explicitly engaging a group of TAFE teachers in a critical spirit discourse to discover what value it had for them. Semi-structured interviews revealed that an explicit engagement with a critical spirit discourse was of value to these TAFE teachers, as: a reflective tool, constructs for practice and self-understanding, and for some, an identity construct.

Introduction

The focus of this paper is on the convergence of teacher identity and institutional change and, at a deeper lens, on the relationship between the personal and professional constructs of what it is to be a teacher and how this plays out in a context of educational reform. Specific attention is

paid to Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers and the institutional environment in which they work. Critical spirit (Oxman-Michelli, 1992; Siegel, 1988, 1993) is the theoretical construct for the research. In particular, the research focuses on TAFE teachers' engagements with manifestations of critical spirit in relation to their work environments.

Context

The work world of TAFE teachers is changing. The impact of economic rationalism and its collaborator new vocationalism (for example, Ball, 1994; Grubb, 1996) in manipulating the topography of the vocational education and training (VET) sector in Australia has been significant (Butler, 1997; Chappell, 1998, 1999; Darwin, 2004; Harris, Simons, & Clayton, 2005; Hawke, 1997; Marginson, 1994, 1997; Seddon & Marginson, 2001). How TAFE teachers go about dealing with the educational reform of new directions, policies and curriculum at TAFE level, and how this impacts upon their identity formation, are of significance in this paper.

The scope, depth and impact of these changes to the world of TAFE teachers and the effects of these changes on their personal and professional lives have been weighty. Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) in a major study of VET practitioners, of whom TAFE teachers as a group occupy a majority presence, stated "changes to the VET system have required shifts in practitioners' habits, beliefs, values, skills and knowledge" (p. 10). Of note in this study is the authors' reporting that the VET practitioners from public providers, as TAFE teachers are, "all reported negative feelings…" towards these sectoral changes (p. 10). Indeed, this is also borne out in research carried out by researchers such as Childs (2000), Chappell (1998, 1999), Grabau (1999) and Kronemann (2001a, 2001b), all of who reported the positions of marginalisation experienced by TAFE teachers. Chappell arguably summed up the context of change that TAFE teachers have been experiencing when he stated that TAFE teachers are being asked "…to change their identity" (1999, p. 3).

The intentions of a series of forums conducted by McKenna and Mitchell (2006) as a part of the Reframing the Future (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008) strategy aimed at professional development for educational change by capacity building within the VET workforce, was on looking towards "strengthen[ing] a sense of professional identity" (p. 2). This is an aspiration that this paper also shares. For this paper, it is about seeking to

strengthen the subjective positions that TAFE teachers hold about themselves in relation to both personal and professional identities within the context of their world of work.

Conceptual position

The conceptual framework guiding this research into TAFE teacher identities as it faces and is buffeted by the winds of vocational education reform is the concept of critical spirit. Critical spirit emerged from the literature on critical thinking. It is not abilities or skills that are the focus, but rather the personal traits, character or ways of being that motivate individuals to avoid "…thoughtless intellectual compliance and passivity" (Oxman-Michelli, 1992, p. 1). As a researcher, I was particularly drawn to Oxman-Michelli's (1992) concept of critical spirit that revolves around five major elements:

Independence of mind, in the sense of intellectual autonomy, self-understanding, self-confidence, and courage;
Openmindedness, in the sense of alert curiosity, attentiveness, the spontaneous outreaching for alternative perspectives, intellectual flexibility and the willingness to suspend judgment;
Wholeheartedness, that is, enthusiasm and perseverance in pursuit of an intellectual goal;
Intellectual responsibility, in the sense of objectivity, integrity and humility, as well as confidence in and a commitment to the process and the consequences of reason, and
Respect for others, in terms of sensitivity, empathy, fairmindedness, readiness to listen, [and] willingness to consider the other's point of view. (Oxman-Michelli, 1992, p. 5)

I wondered if critical spirit as a concept, way of being, discourse, or tool could be used by TAFE teachers to increase their understandings of themselves, and open up avenues for the enactment of new subjectivities that might increase their agency within the mentioned sea of change. To this end, I was guided by the research question:

How might an explicit engagement with and reflection upon a critical spirit discourse be of value to particular TAFE teachers in relation to their identity and their relationships with TAFE as an organisation?

This research took a post-structualist perspective that holds the notion of multiple subjectivities as opposed to identity as an unchanging singularity learning new social roles (Nias, 1997). Identity formation occurs and continues to occur within a historical framework where meaning and experience continually interact. An individual's experience is interacting with her or his meaning making and *vice versa* within a discourse (Foucault, 1984). Hence self-knowledge, an understanding of one's identity, comes from individuals interrogating their experience in "a shifting [discursive] space where narratives of subjectivity meet the narratives of culture" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 221). Into the discursive space of TAFE teachers I placed notions of critical spirit. The tension between the post-structural position of multiple identities and the arguably essentialised position of critical spirit was dealt with by (a) ensuring that the notions of critical spirit discussed were a heterogeneous product of the literature, researcher interpretations, and participant interpretations, and (b) attending to data that spoke to the nuanced possibilities that emerge from participant explicit engagement with these notions of critical spirit and other subjectivities that might emerge. To this end I deployed Gee's (1999, 2005) theory and method of discourse analysis to explore "how language gets recruited 'on site' to enact specific social activities and social identities" (p. 1). I took Gee's position that it is "through language [that we] enact a specific social identity" (p. 4). Hence, within this project, the participant TAFE teachers were considered to be constructing identities in relation to: a critical spirit discourse, and their relationships with TAFE and the discourse of new vocationalism.

Research method

The participants in this research were TAFE teachers from various institutes in Queensland and Western Australia. These teachers were studying part-time at the University of Southern Queensland undertaking programs in pre-service teaching. The research reported in this paper is an adjunct to a larger PhD research project.

In the larger project, 40 case narrative artefacts were collected. From this sample 20 were selected on the basis of how well they fell within the evocative writing style articulated by Richardson (1994) as the "*narrative of the self*" (p. 521; *emphasis in original*). These 20 authors were contacted. Eleven agreed to participate in the research. They gave permission to use their initial artefacts, and the collection of subsequent data through credibility checks (Elliott, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Packer & Addison, 1989) and semi-structured interviews (Weiss, 1994). Due to participant attrition, seven interviews were conducted. These ranged in duration from 50 to 70

minutes. Three were conducted face-to-face, two were telephone interviews and one was conducted using 'Skype', a peer-to-peer voice over Internet protocol. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. It was from these interviews that the data was extracted for this paper.

To deploy discourse analysis as a method of analysis, I drew together Gee's (2005) questions in relation to reality building with language, and Oxman-Michelli's (1992) elements of critical spirit. The resultant answers from this synthesis enable me to build a critical spirit framework for explicating critical spirit from teacher discourse (Tyler, 2008a; Tyler, 2008b). Through overlaying this framework onto the TAFE teachers' case narrative artefacts, and through engaging with the participants through credibility checking, I began with these teachers explicit discussion around notions of critical spirit derived from perspectives found in the literature (for example, Oxman-Michelli's (1992), Siegel, 1988 and Paul, 1992) researcher interpretations, and their own interpretations. We engaged in a critical spirit discourse. The findings reported in this paper relate to the value of this critical spirit discourse in relation to their engagements with their world of work, how they built their identities as TAFE teachers, and how these enactments responded to a critical spirit discourse.

In Gee's (2005) account of the tasks of language, he noted that " … language-in-action is always and everywhere an active building process" (p. 10). Thus when we are communicating we are building the very situation that we are communicating about, and at the same time this situation is shaping the language that we use. In these interviews, the participants and I were building a reality—that is, an interview around notions of critical spirit, work and identities as a TAFE teacher.

Findings and discussion

The findings revealed the realities that seven TAFE teachers had built within their respective interviews. These realities constituted conceptions around these TAFE teachers' contexts of work, their particular identities and their constructions in relation to an engagement with a critical spirit discourse. Common within these construction sites were instances of "recognition work" (Gee, 2005, p. 29) in relation to critical spirit. Also built were positions of tension

between these teachers and TAFE as an organisation; tension between these teachers' notions of themselves and the collective notions of TAFE teachers built by the new vocational discourse.

The value of a critical spirit discourse to particular TAFE teachers

Table 1 summarises the articulated value positions that these TAFE teachers held in relation to critical spirit. In the left hand column are the value positions that emerged from an explicit engagement with a critical spirit discourse, whilst in the right hand column are examples of particular teacher discursive chunks (Gee, 2005) from which these positions emerged.

Table 1: The value of critical spirit to particular TAFE teachers

The value of critical spirit	Examples of participant discursive chunks
Valuable as a reflective tool to: 　　review one's teaching practice; 　　improve one's thinking; 　　align what one would like to achieve with what one achieves; and 　　achieve authenticity.	'[J]ust makes you think more in depth about what you're doing." 'Me thinking about how I think." 'For one, it makes people be honest about what they are – what they are actually achieving."
Valuable as a construct to increase understanding of self by: 　　making tacit knowledge about practice and self-explicit; 　　validating self; and 　　identifying what one is good at.	'I could see myself in some of those aspects." 'Because you're able to think, "That's what that is, and that's why I behaved the way I did."" 'I think it highlighted something subconsciously that I'd thought about." '[A] lot of those things I was doing automatically, unbeknown to myself ." 'I suppose it was a way of saying, "I am on the right track. Maybe my attitudes to what I'm doing … are – were okay.""
Valuable as a construct of practice by: 　　enabling greater self-confidence and hence efficacy;	'Critical spirit … that makes us … want to improve yourself [*sic*], and to try to give the students the best outcome."

contributing a particular teaching style; providing a model for practice; helping to make explicit positive teaching practices in others; and providing a means to contest compliance and conformity.	'It kind of leads to a change in my teaching style." '[W]hat I'd like to do is to pick out the elements of different teachers." '[C]ritical spirit, somehow, fights compliance."
Valuable as an identity by offering: a positive public label; and a professional identity.	'[T]hey were words I could incorporate into descriptions for other people." 'Critical spirit to me is something inside that makes us do certain things or want to do things a certain way."

What also emerged were positions of circumspection in relation to an engagement with a critical spirit discourse. Some heed was in relation to having time to use critical spirit constructs in day-to-day practice. Some participants noted that they were "time poor". For one teacher, "in survival mode" whilst attempting to deal with the heavy workload placed on her by audits, the deployment of, or undertaking reflection using critical spirit became less of a priority. This teacher's circumspection appeared as a note of caution. Having aligned herself with critical spirit, she suggested that one should take care with its deployment, suggesting that deploying critical spirit makes one more visible to surveillance by those who wield prescriptive managerialist practices, leaving oneself open to excessive control, a control that in turn subverts one's professionalism. In an interview with another teacher, discussion on the elements of *independence of mind* and *openmindedness* led this TAFE teacher to suggest that "speaking your mind" and "openly seeking variety" to methods of implementing curriculum made her a target, "the eye of Mordor, and its wrath turns toward you, you learn to shut up or leave to survive."

Relationships with TAFE

The strain in the relationships between the majority of these teachers and TAFE was articulated in terms of their relationship with its bureaucracy and certain managerial practices. One teacher's relationship was the most fractious, influencing her to leave her full-time position, whilst others to a lesser extent articulating their perspectives as one in which TAFE was complicit with their respective levels of self-confidence about themselves as teachers. Furthermore, they positioned

the TAFE bureaucracy as thwarting their efforts to enact their own particular identities as 'good' teachers and the activities of 'good' teaching.

In two interviews the teachers assembled a more encouraging relationship with TAFE. While these teachers too acknowledged the stress of being 'thrown in the deep end', they constructed identities that presented them as capable and less affected by the degree of the challenge presented by the bureaucracy. With these teachers their level of agency did not seem as subjugated by their relationship with TAFE.

One teacher assembled a most positive relationship with TAFE. With this teacher there was a slight awkwardness with TAFE's bureaucracy, but central to this relationship was a particular opportunity that TAFE provided. For this teacher it was an opportunity to enact a vital personal teaching identity in relation to his engagement with the Indigenous people of northern Australia. It appeared that there were particular conditions that allowed this identity to flourish, one of which appeared connected to his claim that TAFE actively recruited him, not *vice versa*.

Revealed were instances of these teachers being socially situated by the discourses in which they were immersed (see for example Miller Marsh, 2002b). The interviews were instances of " … language get[ting] recruited on site, to enact specific social activities and social identities" (Gee, 1999, p. 1). There was evidence of historical discourses shaping identities (Webb, 2005) – for example, one teacher looking to emulate the particular qualities of teachers who had taught him as an apprentice, and to take on some notable teaching practices of senior teachers with whom he had worked. Demonstrated also are instances of these TAFE teachers actively engaging in their own identity construction (Danielewicz, 2001). These identities appeared to be assembled from these teachers questioning their experience in instances where their "narratives of subjectivity" (Zembylas, 2003, p. 221) meet the narratives of their sociopolitical contexts. For example, one teacher constructed the identity of a passionate teacher who increased her knowledge and understanding of herself as a teacher through continually enacting the role, and another, positioned his identity as a capable teacher who coped relatively smoothly with the move from industry to the uncertainty of teaching.

Convergence of teacher identities and institutional change

Also within these data were illustrations of these teachers contesting the attempts of the new vocational discourse at positioning them as particular TAFE teachers – for example, positioning them: as TAFE teachers who focus solely on the skill or technique based aspects of teaching (Ramsey, 2000); as enactors of a teacher practice that aligns teacher suitability with an education market with its outputs of quantitative measurement (Seddon, 1998); as different from the traditional teacher identity—the teacher as a professional with specialised knowledge; and as exhibiting teaching identities that align with marketing, customer service, entrepreneurship and facilitators of learning (Black, 2005; Chappell, 1999; Harris & Simons, 2003). These teachers had built identities as teachers who do more than just teach prescriptive curriculum. Their 'more' was positioned as being closely associated with their students. "Going the extra step" for students in helping them with their transitions to jobs, and "passing on extra information" not covered in the curriculum to students was seen as essential. These identities resonated more with notions of themselves as liberal educators, with a focus on lifelong learning, personal transformation, collaborative relationships and social responsibility.

These teachers also contested the new vocational discourse's notion that, to enact the role of a TAFE teacher within the VET training market a level four certificate in training and assessment with appropriate industry experience provided the necessary skills, knowledge and attitude to undertake the role. In the interviews these teachers, except one, explicitly voiced personal dissatisfaction with the level four VET training qualification, claiming it as unsatisfactory to their teaching identities. This desire for more satisfactory levels of training and professional development for themselves as teachers may also be a further expression of particular attitudes toward professional development programs in TAFE. Black (2005) noted that the TAFE head teachers whom he studied had strong negative responses to TAFE run professional development: "[R]esponses include[d] the following: 'it's all crap'; 'learnt nothing'; 'an abuse of resources'; 'waste of time'; 'we were all treated like idiots'" (p. 5). Some participants in the study articulated that it was an attempt at brainwashing, because of the professional development's "emphasis on business and marketing related aspects at the expense of the classroom and pedagogy" (Black, 2005, p. 5).

In the course of this research, teachers' identities resonated with "a broader educational and social role based on … the primacy of the individual learner and the need for continuing vocational education" (Harris, Simons & Clayton, 2005, p. 20). This aligned with traditional notions of teachers that related to curriculum development and teaching, as opposed to notions of the entrepreneur teaching packaged curriculum in an education market (Angwin, 1997). All of the participants built teaching identities in which their students and their development were primary connectors within their individual notions of themselves as teachers. Examples included one teacher's picture of himself as an "enabler" who "help[s] people in remote communities … [to] develop and find their own aspirations", another teacher's as being a teacher "that can lead people to the enjoyment of learning what they're learning" and another's honesty in the "trust[ing] of [her] own decisions … and adapt[ing] to [the] different learning styles" of students.

Not all data positioned the new vocational discourse as a malefactor. In the work undertaken by Seddon and Brown (1997) can be seen instances where change in the nature of TAFE teachers' work had led to opportunities. This work has shown that the changes created by the new vocational discourse had been welcomed by some teachers and not by others. That also appeared the case with some of the teachers in this research. Four teachers showed instances of themselves building opportunities for the expression of certain personal teaching identities that resonated with TAFE and the new vocational discourse. Through this new version of TAFE: one created a space for himself as an expert in engaging with Indigenous Australians; another saw herself as a conduit between vocational education and tertiary education in the business and accounting professions; and another continued his passion for delivering vocational skills in the TAFE system – he stated: "I am also passionate about the TAFE system, fundamentally I think it works."

Conclusions

The interviews reported in this paper were examples of these teachers doing discourse work (Miller Marsh, 2000a). Specifically, there were instances of a critical spirit discourse doing some work of a "transformative teacher identity discourse" (Alsup, 2006, p. 5) that enabled these teachers to traverse the complex terrain "between disparate personal and professional subjectivities" (p. 36).

These teachers reconstructed their subjectivities around various identity discourses—for example, that of a liberal educator and that of a neo vocational educator—they also engaged with and embraced those subjectivities that positioned themselves as teachers who enacted a critical spirit discourse. For example, one teacher aligned herself with critical spirit as a means to win back some self-confidence reported as lost owing to her experiences with TAFE, another used critical spirit as a means of doing his job better, and another crediting critical spirit as enabling a growing understanding of herself as a teacher as one who fosters self-determination in students as opposed to a teacher as one who simply delivers and assesses content.

The realities constructed in the reported interviews indicated particular dissonances existing for these TAFE teachers among their personal subjectivities as TAFE teachers, the subjectivities fostered by TAFE's enactment of the new vocational discourse and the subjectivity of being introduced to what was an arguably new discourse for them, a critical spirit discourse. It was within this terrain that these teachers did "identity work" (Alsup, 2006, p. 9) on their respective states of dissonance and also in "increasing their metacognitive awareness" (p. 9) of themselves that enabled them to increase traction on their individual agency as teachers.

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