Curriculum Leadership, Quality and Technology in a Suite of Australian Further Education and Training Teacher Education Programs: Making Meaning, Performing Practice and Constructing New Learning Futures

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Abstract

Constructing new learning futures is an ongoing challenge and opportunity for contemporary learners and educators alike. A crucial element of that construction is making meaning by and for all participants in the educational enterprise. Such meaning making depends in turn on the performance of practice – that is, on the regular, repeated enactment of situated learning and teaching in specific contexts and environments that turns abstract and hypothetical ideas about education into experienced and lived realities.

This paper applies and demonstrates this argument in relation to a suite of further education and training (FET) teacher education programs at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ), Australia. The authors elaborate a set of evaluative questions for the leadership, quality and technology dimensions of the curriculum of those programs. On the basis of those questions, the authors generate a conceptual framework that they argue is productive in identifying the principles and strategies of making meaning and performing practice that are most likely to promote the construction of new and enabling learning futures.

Introduction

The further education and training (FET) component of Australian teacher education provides distinctive challenges and opportunities in terms of making meaning, performing practice and constructing new learning futures. The challenges derive partly from FET's generally marginalised status within teacher education and formal educational provision more broadly. The opportunities attend such developments as increased government interest in postcompulsory education, fuelled by the widespread impact of the current skills shortage in most Western countries.

Leadership, quality and technology are significant concepts in any teacher education curriculum. Certainly they constitute useful evaluative lenses for interrogating the FET curriculum at one Australian university, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). That interrogation is directed at establishing the extent to which, and the ways in which, the USQ FET programs exhibit and promote sustainable and potentially transformative leadership, quality and technology – often in spite of contradictory and countervailing forces and influences. More broadly, these evaluative lenses provide a

prospective conceptual framework for analysing the programs as potential curriculum innovation.

The paper consists of four sections: a brief overview of the FET programs at USQ, with a focus on their curriculum, followed by the distillation of a set of evaluative questions to interrogate how that curriculum exhibits and enacts each of leadership, quality and technology that are sustainable and potentially transformative. The paper concludes by elaborating a conceptual framework that highlights the links and synergies as well as the tensions and dissonances between meaning making and performing practice in this particular incarnation of FET curriculum, and that envisages the implications and prospects for constructing new and enabling learning futures in Australian FET.

The FET Programs at USQ

There are four FET programs at USQ: the Associate Degree in FET (ADFT), the Bachelor of FET (BFET), the Bachelor of Education (FET) (BEFT) and the Graduate Diploma of FET (GDFT). The highest enrolment is in the three year BFET program, which provides preservice teacher/trainer education for those individuals wishing to hold a degree and teach within the vocational education and training (VET) sector. The second highest enrolment is the BEFT four year preservice teaching program for individuals wishing to teach in the secondary school sector. Graduates from this program are eligible to apply for teacher registration with the Queensland College of Teachers. The ADFT is an entry-level qualification relevant to trainers, facilitators and workplace trainers in any sector, whilst the GDFT is for those with a degree (providing content knowledge) wishing to be educators within the postcompulsory sector.

There are four distinctive features of this suite of programs. USQ FET programs:
- Offer a means of managing and structuring preservice and inservice teacher/trainer education for those with trades and (para)professionals wanting to teach in the VET, senior/middle schooling and private sectors;
- Offer a substantial credit transfer pathway for prior trade and (para)professional qualifications and experience;
- Are mostly nested, providing multiple entry and exit choices; and
- Are offered in the distance delivery mode.

The curriculum within these programs focuses on the professional education components of pedagogy – instruction and teaching, lifelong learning, postcompulsory contexts, sociocultural aspects of education, program design, assessment, evaluation and blended delivery. All the programs have preservice teaching practicum components, with the BEFT requiring the highest practicum commitment of 100 days. Content, both basic and advanced, is offered by way of elective choices within minor and major areas of studies. In most cases it is in the basic content area where applicants may seek to have their trade or (para)professional qualification recognised for advanced standing.

Leadership in the USQ FET Program Curriculum

This section of the paper explores notions of leadership and how its associated discourses impact on the FET programs at USQ. It is envisaged that uncovering

notions of leadership that are useful to the enactment of FET curriculum will leave the authors with one element of a tripartite perspective through which to identify and analyse how the curriculum of the programs has interacted with its stakeholders and the nature of the relationships which have grown from those interactions. This section is guided by the question, "What notions of leadership would help to translate stakeholder aspirations and the discursive intent of lifelong education into action within the redesigning of the FET curriculum at USQ?" First to be addressed is a discourse of leadership that appears to dominate the perceptions of faculty management. Second, a counternarrative is articulated, one that appears to resist management (pre)conceptions and that possibly strikes a more resonant chord with the transformative components of meaning making for both lecturer and student.

Educational leadership is about focusing "on improving the quality of teaching, learning and educational outcomes and promoting the best thinking about teaching and learning" (Woolf & Carpenter, 2006, p. 1). As lecturers within the above-mentioned programs we are leading and managing the teaching and learning relationship with our students and colleagues. One pervading discourse that surrounds how we go about our work is that of 'new managerialism'. Acknowledging that the debate relating to leadership versus management continues (Re, 2007), for the purposes of this paper we see these two concepts as bedfellows as they appear interdependent in relation to organisational success. Kopp (2005) tells us that leadership is essential for success, and acknowledges the importance of management in relation to task focus and relationship focus. Like Chappell (1998), our experience is that individuals within leadership positions within contemporary educational institutions tend to lead with the discourse of new managerialism, privileging value for money, efficiency, competition, micro management practices and corporatisation of public institutions (Deem, 1998) and "people compet[ing] as educational consumers and producers" (Gouthro, 2002, p. 334) over a broader concept of democratic citizenship with important educational and societal concerns.

Because the authors hold to adult learning principles and the broader concept of lifelong learning as being an emancipatory project where the individual and the community 'learn to be' within a more democratic and egalitarian world, we wish to offer a counter discourse on leadership. This counternarrative offers one possible conceptual means to cope with modernisation and is in keeping with what we believe is a more balanced lifelong learning perspective.

From this perspective, Hargreaves and Fink (2004) talk of sustainable leadership. Their study "found that [it is] a key force leading to meaningful, long-term change" (p. 8). Hargreaves and Fink offer several principles to keep in mind as we examine the teaching/learning relationship through the question posed above. Thus sustainable leadership:

1. Looks to going beyond temporary gains to create lasting improvements in learning
2. Plans and prepares for succession and an influx of new leaders
3. Grooms new leaders
4. Is socially just
5. Is resourceful and authentic in nurturing the success of others
6. Promotes diversity, and
7. Is activist. (p. 12)

These principles all appear to resonate with lifelong learning as being a process, something which is for long-term gains as opposed to a short-term, 'means to an end' market perspective, is emancipatory in socially just ways, embraces diversity, and is resourceful and activist in orientation in that it promotes the success of all, not a privileged few. Below we offer a selection of questions that focus our attention on elements of sustainable leadership as we engage with curriculum changes in the FET programs at USQ:

- In what way do suggested changes plan for lasting improvement?
- How have we planned for the inclusion of new colleagues?
- In what way are curriculum changes enabling leadership in our students and lecturers?
- What are our principles of social justice in relation to assessment and access?
- How do we nurture success?
- How do we embrace diversity?
- In what way does our practice promote lifelong learning?

These questions are by no means the final word but serve to guide us as leaders in teaching and learning as we engage in relationships with both students and colleagues. Dinham (2004) suggest that as educational leaders we create "the conditions – the climate, culture, process and procedures – where teachers can teach and students can learn and…[we] provide leadership for teachers' professional learning" (p. 3). Our intention is to work diligently towards this assertion.

Quality in the USQ FET Program Curriculum

Like leadership, quality stands at the centre of a set of competing and sometimes contradictory discourses in contemporary Australian higher education. Discourses linking discussions of quality with the 'new managerialism' critiqued in the previous section conceptualise quality in terms of compliance with standards, fitness for purpose, fulfilment of customer needs and value for money (Rowan, 2003, p. 3). While in themselves these definitions and their associated values might appear to be unexceptionable, when empowered by new managerialism they assume what for the authors is a dominance out of keeping with their worth and in the process they elide recognition of alternative and less exclusionary and elitist understandings of quality.

By contrast, Rowan (2003, p. 7) has articulated three dimensions of such alternative understandings of quality:

- First, the critique of dominant educational practices (including the standards and criteria that are regularly used to assess quality);
- Second, the identification of the consequences of dominant educational practices (and associated 'evaluation' criteria) for particular individuals and groups, and
- Third, a commitment to the fundamental *transformation* of those practices with negative consequences. (*emphasis in original*)

Significantly there is a strong resonance between Rowan's (2003, p. 7) encapsulation of the principles underpinning these three dimensions as "critique, consequence and transformation" and the project being essayed in this paper: the elaboration of a conceptual framework that can guide and inform the reflexive interrogation of the

USQ FET curriculum in order to identify its effects and its potential for sustainability and transformation in the lives of its students and teachers. The authors' understanding of curriculum quality is therefore much closer to Rowan's emphasis on resistance and transformation of the forces of capture and homogenisation, while recognising the need to acknowledge, and sometimes to negotiate with or around, those forces.

Following Rowan (2003), then, we recognise that the USQ FET curriculum is subject to powerful constraints that render it liable to capture by "dominant educational practices" (p. 7). For example, in common with other USQ teacher education programs the FET programs must be accredited by the Queensland College of Teachers, which evaluates its curriculum, pedagogy and assessment practices against a checklist of criteria. The FET curriculum must also include sufficient coverage of currently dominant topics within the Australian VET system, including competency-based training and assessment, national industry-based curriculum and qualifications frameworks and employability skills. The sheer complexity and fluidity of the Australian VET system place a considerable burden on the USQ FET curriculum because an emphasis on the content of these and related topics necessarily reduces the space available to engage with other and potentially resistant educational ideas.

Yet it is precisely those other educational ideas that must be accorded an appropriate place in the USQ FET curriculum if it is to fulfil the authors' understanding of curriculum quality outlined above and if it is to enable students and teachers in the programs to engage in "the identification of the consequences of dominant educational practices (and associated 'evaluation' criteria) for particular individuals and groups" (Rowan, 2003, p. 7). This kind of parallel critique of dominant practices is not easy to establish and maintain and requires dispositions to and skills of reflexivity and engagement for both students and teachers, who must negotiate individual and collective pathways among different and sometimes contradictory discourses and understandings.

Thirdly, we contend that a quality FET curriculum is one that evokes and enacts "a commitment to the fundamental *transformation* of those practices with negative consequences" (Rowan, 2003, p. 7; *emphasis in original*). In many respects this is the most difficult dimension of an alternative conception of quality to implement and measure in relation to curriculum. Certainly we make modest and provisional rather than exaggerated and definitive claims about the transformative quality of the USQ FET programs, recognising in doing so that transformation is often experienced long after the initial stimulus and in ways that were not envisaged at the time of that stimulus. At the same time, we assert that the rigorous questioning of the *status quo* and the articulation of possible alternatives by many students – informally in online discussion forums and formally in summative assessment items – augur well for the curriculum quality of those programs. In doing so, there is evidence of making meaning and performing practice by these students and their lecturers that are framed by an awareness of the politicised character of the Australian VET system and a desire to construct new learning futures that are more equitable, sustainable and transformative.

On the basis of this discussion, then, the following questions might appropriately be considered a litmus test for interrogating the quality of the FET programs at USQ:

- To what extent does the programs' focus on standards, fitness for purpose, fulfilment of customer needs and value for money allow space for other educational ideas?
- In what ways do the programs conceive and implement constructive critique of dominant educational practices?
- How is transformation of those practices conceptualised and enacted in the programs, and is that conceptualisation and enactment accepted or even noticed by anyone other than the program staff members?

Technology in the USQ FET Program Curriculum

Studies in curriculum highlight the importance of philosophical, psychological and sociocultural influences on curriculum presage and development. An analysis of the role of technology – and specifically information and communication technologies (ICTs) – in curriculum innovation in the suite of FET programs at USQ draws on each of these influences in significant ways that serve to illustrate the potential benefits and risks of technology as educational tool and pedagogical practice.

According to Print (1988), the ontological, epistemological and axiological stance adopted by those responsible for curriculum development comprises the curriculum developer's educational philosophy and hence impacts on subsequent curriculum development. The philosophical questions "What is real? What is good? What is truth?" (Print, 1988, p. 53), when posed in relation to the question of the role of technology in education, force an examination and re-evaluation of taken-for-granted assumptions of technological determinism and 'utopianism' that pervade the dominant discourse: is technology a means to an end, or an end in and of itself? Is it values free or value laden (Hofmann, 2006)? We know, for example, that technology is both a driver of the increased demand for FET (and lifelong learning) – in terms of the need for continual updating of knowledge and skills – and a tool or medium for delivery. We know also that it is beneficial, in that it affords access to information for those battling the 'tyranny of distance' and disability – whilst at the same time reinforcing existing inequities that have come to be characterised in terms of a 'digital divide'.

Dobson (2006, p. 2) summarises the debate in relation to the benefits and risks associated with technology-enhanced lifelong learning as follows:

> Those in favour of ICT as an educational resource in an emerging learning society talk of the opportunities for learning offered by different forms of ICT. Three main arguments are highlighted: that ICT can lead to a widening of educational participation, it can support a diversity of educational provision and that ICT can lead to better forms and outcomes of adult learning. Those against the optimists raise the digital divide as an important argument.

The increasingly symbiotic relationship among technology, society and learning has moved the discussion around technology and curriculum from a focus on technology as tool for instructional design and delivery (instructional systems) versus technology as content (learning how to use the technology) to a focus on the creation of "sociotechnical environments" that "give users the design power to modify the technical systems according to their needs" (Fischer & Sugimoto, n.d., p. 8). Warschauer (2002) asserts that technology and society are "intertwined and co-constituitive", that ICT use is a social practice that is afforded and enabled not only by education but also by power, that what is important is people's ability to make use of technology to engage in "meaningful social practices" and that as educators our focus

should be "on the transformation, not [on] the technology". Implications for FET include the emergence of a new sociotechnical conception of curriculum that utilises emerging ICTs and sociotechnical environments to enhance opportunities for participation in lifelong and lifewide learning, blurring the boundaries between formal and informal learning and challenging and enabling both learners and educators in FET programs to engage in meaningful and authentic ways with educational content, delivery and assessment in context.

According to Brady (1995), curriculum developers draw on the discipline of educational psychology in order to determine educational objectives, to assess and understand learner characteristics and to develop, implement and evaluate teaching/learning processes. In recent years, the notion of "flexibility" has dominated pedagogical discourse in vocational and tertiary education and training contexts, with terms such as "flexible delivery" and "flexible learning" being used as synonyms for the delivery of learning via computers and the Internet, and linked to self-directed learning, self-paced learning, computer-managed learning and assessment and, more recently, student-centred learning, constructivism, distributed learning, (co)generative learning and networked learning.

Flexible learning and flexible delivery can, on the one hand, affirm and progress the values of liberal, humanistic approaches to education by affording greater degrees of learner choice and control whilst on the other hand being open to exploitation by market forces that serve to support the commodification of knowledge, competition among educational institutions and increased consumer choice in the education market (Nunan, 1996). Moreover, the tendency for suppliers of ICTs to build obsolescence into their products whilst simultaneously stretching the boundaries of infrastructure capacity does not bode well for sustainable, technology-enhanced learning futures that are universally accessible, and resonates with the discourses of corporate managerialism discussed in previous sections on leadership and quality.

In order to determine the extent to which the FET curriculum exhibits, enacts and promotes technology as beneficial, sustainable and potentially transformative, the following questions can be posed:

(How) does the FET curriculum enact and promote the use of technology-enhanced learning that:

- Is universally accessible?
- Enables learners to engage in meaningful social practices?
- Enables participation in lifelong and lifewide learning?
- Resists the tendency to be driven by technological rather than educational ends?
- Facilitates engagement in meaningful and authentic ways with educational content, delivery and assessment in context?

Conclusion

Figure 1 below represents a conceptual synthesis of the foregoing account of curriculum leadership, quality and technology. A number of key features of this synthesis should be noted:

- assigning analytical equality to the three dimensions of leadership, quality and technology

- giving rein to the evaluative power of the three sets of questions posed above about those dimensions
- attending to both the synergies and the dissonances among those dimensions
- understanding that those dimensions are underpinned by specific conceptualisations and values
- accepting that those dimensions are enacted in socially and politically constructed contexts
- valuing equally the perspectives of multiple stakeholders while recognising their different interests.

It remains for future publications to apply this framework to the USQ FET programs and thereby to elicit factors that facilitate and/or inhibit curriculum leadership, quality and technology and to identify strategies that are effective in promoting meaning making from multiple perspectives and in performing practice that challenges the *status quo*. Constructing the new learning futures that can potentially result from that facilitation and promotion requires all stakeholders, but particularly students and academics, to design and implement curriculum in ways that enable these challenges to be seized.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework for interrogating curriculum leadership, quality and technology in the USQ FET programs
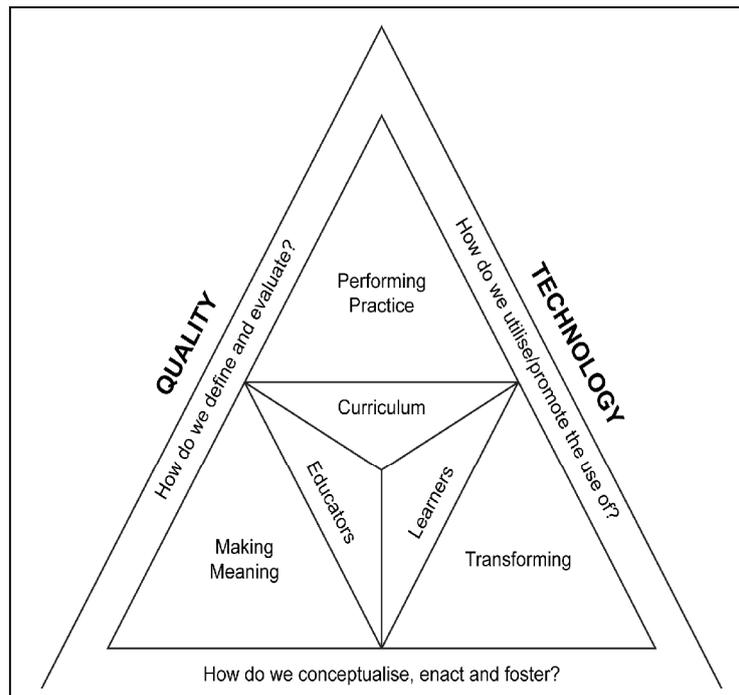
Acknowledgments

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