



Nailing Down an Identity – The Voices of Six Carpentry Educators

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a small research study in which six carpentry tutors at an urban polytechnic were interviewed regarding their identity and perceptions of their work as trades educators. Some preliminary findings suggest that the 'occupational identity' (Seddon, 2008) of trades educators as 'teachers' is less problematic than suggested (see Haycock & Kelly, 2009). This paper argues that notions of good teaching within Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) may be driven by normative/singular notions of pedagogy that do not recognize specific or 'signature pedagogies' (Shulman, 2005) active within trades education. It is suggested that further work in the area of 'signature pedagogies' for the trades will legitimise trade educator practice. However, it may challenge professional developers, teacher trainers and educational administrators within institutions to reconsider their assumptions about what constitutes 'good teaching' in a trade related environment.

INTRODUCTION

The world of tertiary vocational education is broad. Even within the trades, educators continually move between and within different contexts. Educational work is undertaken in classrooms, workshops, on-site at simulated work sites and at various off-site work places. Students are full-time or part-time, adult or school leavers; apprentices or experienced trades people updating or gaining national qualifications. The teaching content includes both 'hands-on' skills and theoretical knowledge. The educational work involves working alongside employers, industry and within institutional and industry briefs.

Tertiary Trades educators thus occupy dual occupational worlds; they are simultaneously members of their trade *and* educators (Beatty, 1998; Chappell & Johnston, 2003; Haycock & Kelly, 2009; Palmieri, 2004; Seddon, 2008). While Haycock and Kelly (2009) suggest that this is problematic, and "creates a certain amount of confusion and contradiction" (Haycock & Kelly, 2009, p.4), in

contrast, Chappell (2001) suggests that the educational identity of vocational educators is strong and they move easily between the world of work and the world of education.

The notions of 'good teaching' held by those within Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) who are charged with making trades people into educators may not conform to the ideas about teaching and learning that are common within the trades. Difficulties may be experienced when normative and singular concepts of pedagogy held within institutions collide with trade knowledge. The very institutions that have employed them for their occupational knowledge may challenge the work and identity of trade educators contributing to any 'confusion and contradiction'.

This paper reports on a research project that explores vocational trades educators' work and identity. It is guided by a key question. How do tertiary trade educators identify themselves and their work? In terms of occupational identity this question extends to the pedagogical framework that guides trade educator practice. The notions of effective teaching held by instructors or professional developers in institutions may be different to that which is relevant or useful to trades educators in terms of their students, their specific world of work and their complex identities.

The findings in the study challenge suggestions that there is contradiction and confusion (Haycock & Kelly, 2009) in the dual occupational identity of the trade educator as both tradesperson and educator. Findings suggest that trades educators are clear about the purpose and nature of their role. Responses to questions relating to the generalities and intricacies involved in the 'passing on' of trade knowledge and skills in an institutional environment were clear, precise, commonly held and not contradictory. If there is contradiction and confusion it may be less to do with aspects of dual occupational identity than with the complex and often changing external factors that constrain, control and 'unsettle' the work of trades educators.

Uncovering the work of trades educators and examining an underlying model through the lens of 'signature pedagogies' (Shulman, 2005) can provide a 'way in' to trades education, legitimise trades practices and challenge traditional concepts of 'good teaching' in a vocational context. As suggested by Shulman (2005), knowledge of specific pedagogical forms provides an opportunity to 'reconsider' the pedagogical environment.

Shulman (2005) suggests that educating novices involves three apprenticeships; a cognitive apprenticeship where the novice learns to think like a member of the occupation, a skills apprenticeship where the practices of the occupation are learned, and a moral apprenticeship that involves learning the ethics and responsibilities associated with that occupation. The way in which these are put into practice as preparation for those entering a given occupation provides a powerful lens with which to view educator practice.

Shulman's scenario has implications for trades educators and for the role of teacher educators. It suggests that trades educators are best placed to define the skills, concepts and ethical responsibilities that represent both the trade in which they are located and the pedagogical practices associated with their trade.

TRADES EDUCATORS AND CHANGE

Teachers' work and voice has been undercut by the assertion of corporate and managerial imperatives, alongside a significant diversification and de-centering of learning beyond the formal institutions of education and training.

Seddon (2008, p.3)

This paper explores the idea of a 'silent space' that sits at the centre of the debate and discussions around vocational education and training reform in New Zealand. In trades education this space is occupied by trades educators; those centrally involved in the work of educating novices in the trades; the skilled workforce of the future. However, their expertise can at times be overlooked in favour of standardized curriculum and quality processes designed for the purposes of compliance. It is suggested that trades educators have largely untapped and unacknowledged views on the nature of trades related education and that these perspectives are legitimate perspectives that can contribute to a model for trades education in the new era.

The literature on vocational education and training suggests that there are clear global trends currently facing the sector. There are changes in the culture of the student body (Adams & Gamage, 2008; Bathmaker & Avis, 2005), dramatic technological advances (Hillier, 2009), the need for multicultural diversity (Adams & Gamage, 2008; Marginson, 2000), and the ever-changing market place. Most particularly, teaching and learning has become progressively scrutinized (Lumby, 2001 as quoted in Adams & Gamage, 2008). In general, vocational and trade education is "heavily burdened by the imposed need for compliance" (Haycock & Kelly, 2009).

The profound changes in trades related education has 'disturbed' (Seddon, 2009) educator knowledge. According to a number of writers, the most recent reforms in this area of education "have diminished the professionalism of teaching" in the sector (Anderson, Brown, & Rushbrook, 2004; Schuller & Bergami, 2008; Seddon, 2008) in Australia and in New Zealand. Vocational educators have been 'shut out' of involvement in policy development and implementation (Harris, Simons, & Clayton, 2005). Similarly, discussions about the nature of knowledge and what should count as vocational knowledge continues to be an important consideration (Stevenson, 2007) discussed by standard setting bodies and often separate from educators themselves.

Various international calls to 're-think' vocational and tertiary education (Attwell, 2007; Chappell & Johnston, 2003) suggest that there is a need to think in terms of a new model for the 21st century (Anderson, Clemans, Farrell, & Seddon, 2001; Schuller & Bergami, 2008; Seddon, 2008; Vahasantanen & Etelapelto, 2009). Further, it is identified (see Anderson, Clemans, Farrell & Seddon, 2001) that if changes are to be transformational, models will need to acknowledge the individual identities that make up Vocational Education and Training (VET).

It is appropriate that as this area of education is re-examined and re-thought, a variety of perspectives are heard. Trades educators have a role in the re-defining of trades education for a new era. It is argued that their knowledge, developed through experiences in the trade and educational environment,

balance 'self serving' (Schuller & Bergami, 2008) economic models, which are often heard in debates.

SIGNATURE PEDAGOGIES

Trade educators' competence is recognised in terms of their specific trade. Trade teaching practice is less well recognized. A term that blends the notions of professional identity and educator expertise is 'signature pedagogy'. Coined by Lee Shulman of the Carnegie Foundation, 'signature pedagogy' refers to teaching as the "reproduction of a specific discipline" (Jesson, 2010).

Signature pedagogies are 'types of teaching', a "constellation of knowledge and meaning-making activities that is both the aim and the method of teaching" (Parker, Chambers, Huber, & Phipps, 2008, p.115). Three critical aspects are highlighted in which those being educated in a specific field are instructed: what it means "to think, to perform and to act with integrity" (Shulman, 2005, p.52) within that area of work. A signature pedagogy is thus a three-way model involving three apprenticeships: a cognitive apprenticeship, a practical apprenticeship and a moral apprenticeship.

A signature pedagogy is a "mode of teaching that has become inextricably identified with preparing people for a particular profession" (Shulman, 2005, p.9) or in this case, a particular trade. A signature pedagogy applied to trades education, using Shulman's model, will have three characteristics: firstly, it will be distinctive to that trade; secondly, it will be pervasive within the curriculum, or will have "rules for engagement" that pervade from topic to topic across a course; and, thirdly, it will cut across institutions as an essential element of "instruction and socialization" (p.9).

Shulman and his colleagues at the Carnegie Foundation explored the professions as a location for signature pedagogies. The complex field of trades education has yet to be considered through this lens, yet the concept, associated with a traditional trade apprenticeship, is apparent in the model. Shulman (2005) suggests that pedagogies which "bridge theory and practice are never simple" (p.56). Such is the world of the vocational trades educator. Signature pedagogies are seen here as a starting point for recognising and legitimising trade occupational expertise as educators, through the specific pedagogical practices in which they engage.

WHAT IS A TRADES EDUCATOR?

Trades educators are situated in a complex and often changing environment. This is a role that is often misunderstood, under appreciated and frequently experiences low standing (Billett, 2009). The teaching role is complex and educators are often in the position of renegotiating their professional identities (Vahasantanen & Etelapelto, 2009). Seddon (2008), in Australia, argues that the recognition and legitimation of the occupational expertise of educators in vocational education has been eroded through recent educational reforms that have redefined the tertiary educational boundaries. The 'open training market' has 'disendorsed' the Technical and Further Education (TAFE) environment and devalued the occupational expertise of those working in this environment.

Similarly, in New Zealand the ‘scope and character’ of trades education and training has changed as ‘sectoral boundaries’ have become redrawn (Seddon, 2008).

With its long history of learning and apprenticeship (see Brown, 2010), and the impact of unprecedented change (Chappell, 2003) in the “increasingly complex environment” (Robertson, 2008) of trade related teaching, a unique set of challenges are brought to bear on trades educators. Notions of teaching and learning become tested. Trade qualifications that have become increasingly text-based have educators questioning “whether they constitute a new form of curriculum” (Brown, 2010, p.1).

Notions of what to teach and how to teach it are part of the challenges in the current trade education environment in an ITP. Trades educators as representatives of the “inherited culture” (Willis & Trondman, 2002, p.397) of trades have a perspective that is based in a particular historical, social and cultural context (Seddon, 2009). Trades education is more than a vehicle for industry, or the economy. It is part of a bigger picture of ‘lived experiences’, culture, tradition and social reality. It is however increasingly ‘steered’ (Myers & Young, 1997) by institutions and organisations separate from the ‘life worlds’ defined by trades.

Accurately typifying the work of a trades teacher within an ITP is problematic. While it is clear the traditional role of trades teacher has changed (Figgis, 2009), accurately assessing the roles and purposes of vocational education especially of those involved in trades teaching is not straight-forward (p.23).

In the current tight fiscal environment where funding is to be more closely linked to performance (Ministry of Education, 2010, p.14), teaching practice in the tertiary vocational education sector has come under increased scrutiny. Institutional initiatives drive attempts to identify and enforce teaching practices that are assumed to lead to heightened student retention and success.

Staff developers, educational advisors, administrators and those involved in teacher training, often guide vocational trades educators to consider their educational approach. Such collaborations are designed to enhance effective teaching and learning but are not always successful (see, for example, McFarlane & Hughes, 2009) and are often driven by concepts of good teaching that challenge trade related pedagogical concepts.

NOTIONS OF ‘GOOD TEACHING’

Often concepts of ‘good teaching’ in tertiary vocational education are borrowed from either the compulsory sector (Robertson, 2008) or from the tertiary academic sector. The idea of ‘good teaching’, relatively coherent in the compulsory sector, varies in the tertiary vocational education environment (Palmieri, 2004). Attempts have been made to identify ‘good teaching’ in this area (see Figgis, 2009) but singular notions do not take into account the wide variety of frameworks within which specific fields operate, specific pedagogical challenges or shifting contexts. There is a lack of contextualized support for teaching.

Because there is a lack of recognition of the specific pedagogies that exist within vocational education in general (Gleeson, Davies, & Wheeler, 2005), and

trades education in particular, there may be an assumption that the principles and practices of ‘good teaching’ in the vocational environment are generic. Perhaps for this reason collaboration between trades educators and educational advisors are not always straightforward.

Such relationships can also be hindered by the centralized approach of professional development within an institution. This contributes to a lack of credibility and a strategic resistance for professional development (MacFarlane & Hughes, 2009). Professional development centres within institutions tend to be aligned with service units (MacFarlane & Hughes, 2009) and much of their approach is procedural and contained within quality control systems (Carew, Lefoe, Bell, & Armour, 2008; Ramsden, 2008). Very often professional development units are seen as the “ally of a managerial culture” (MacFarlane & Hughes, 2009) or part of a “quality industry” (Ramsden, 2008).

The findings within this study suggest that professional development and teacher education in the area of trades requires an appreciation of the complexity of teaching and learning within these diverse situations. This means that the role of trade teacher is recognized and legitimized within the *specific* place he or she occupies within an institution and the world of work. It entails relationships between teacher educators and trades educators that are based on reciprocity (Grollmann, 2009).

THE PROJECT

The aims of this study were to highlight the teaching identity of six carpentry trade educators and expose occupational expertise and pedagogical understandings. This was an investigation into the ‘silent space’ of trades education and is a starting point for a further study into signature pedagogies in trades education. The interviews sought to bring into discussion what it is to be a trades educator in the modern era. The goal was to highlight trade teacher ‘know-how’ in terms of subject and pedagogy and to ‘illuminate’ educator concepts of their work.

The study was undertaken in a large urban polytechnic in New Zealand. Six carpentry tutors were interviewed. All participants were self selected. They responded to an email inviting participants to be part of a small study into trades educators and trades education. All participants completed a short questionnaire to provide quantitative information relating to their time in the trade, trade background, teaching background and age range. Participants were invited to be part of a focus group or individual interview. All participants selected a one-to-one interview. Interviews were transcribed. Participants were provided with the transcripts, which they had the opportunity to alter.

It is significant that rather than a series of questions, the interviews became conversations that followed a series of topics. In this way interviews became semi-structured guided conversations that related to the current work of the participant but moved chronologically. Guided conversations became stories, backgrounds, and life histories. The participants became agents in the construction of their stories of work, and ‘becoming’, first as a tradesperson, and then a trades educator. Chronologically two of the stories began at school, in one case, at primary school. All stories covered the participants’ own experiences as an apprentice.

As the educators described their work and acknowledged their various contexts, life history as a method emerged as a vehicle to identify and explore specific and relevant pedagogies. This was not an intentional approach but emerged in the first interview as an appropriate and fitting slant that followed through to the subsequent interviews.

The family of approaches known as life history (Goodson, 2001), or biographical and narrative approaches, are valuable in identity research (Goodson, 2001, p.129) and especially in education where “public and private cannot be separated” (p.133). Centrally, this approach recognises teachers’ “life and work as a social construction [and provides] a valuable lens for observing contemporary moves to restructure and reform ...” (Goodson & Numan, 2002, p.276). Goodson (2001) suggests that this approach provides for an understanding of teachers’ work as situated within a social context (Goodson & Numan, 2002), and “can give expression ... to hidden or ‘silenced lives’” (p.133)

It is suggested (Goodson & Choi, 2008) that educational researchers involved in studies of teachers’ lives recognize that “the personal life of a teacher is crucially linked to his or her teaching” (p.31). This method contributes to wider educational goals in that it seeks to “broaden the focus of teacher education and development to include the social and political the contextual and the collective” (Goodson & Numan, 2002, p.273).

Trade educators – nailed down

Interviews were from 40 minutes to one and a half hours in duration. Educators ranged in age from 40-60+ years. Three were in the 40-49 year age range, two in the 50-60 year age range and one 60+. All participants had spent more than 15 years working in industry before taking on the role of ‘lecturer’ at an institution. The average amount of time in industry was 26 years.

All participants had completed an apprenticeship as an entry to industry. Four of the six had advanced trade training in the form of Advanced Trade Certificate. One participant had a Diploma in Construction Management. All educators had a form of teacher/educator training. These included a Certificate in Adult Teaching, Advanced Certificate in Adult Teaching, and Certificate in Elearning, Tutor Training Certificate, Technical Training Certificate and Graduate Diploma in Higher Education.

The educators had a wide range of industry experience including spec’ building, carpentry, management, sub-contracting, ‘on the tools’, and in one case, trade secondary school teaching.

The time spent in teaching ranged from three years to more than 20 years. One tutor had moved a number of times between the fields of industry and education, stating that he became ‘disillusioned’ and ‘frustrated’ with the education sector and at times ‘felt the need’ to go back to industry. Three of the educators continued to work in their trade during holidays and weekends.

Trade educator identity – denailing

Interviews explored the notion of identity and the questions were broad. They included what participants ‘call’ themselves, their ‘idea’ of trades education and how they might describe what they do. They were asked how their work differs from workplace training. All names have been changed to preserve the anonymity of participants.

Participants had a range of responses when probed about the ‘name’ they give themselves. Responses showed that all educators identified in terms of their dual role – ‘building tutor’, ‘a teacher of builders’, a ‘facilitator – guide on the side’. Ray clarified what he calls himself, in this way:

They have given us a fancy word, ‘lecturer’ and they have called us ‘learning facilitators’, but I think I am just an ordinary guy who wants to pass on knowledge. It’s not mine to keep. Okay? I get taught it and I’ve got to pass it on. So, in a way I’m a teacher, but I don’t want to give myself a flash name ... I teach, that’s what I say, I teach.

Ron put it this way:

I say I’m a teacher now, but it took me a couple of years to make that change in my head because I’d been a builder for 25 years; you know it’s quite a big deal you still think of yourself as a builder when you’re first here then after awhile you realise that’s not my job anymore. You need to make that mind change ... need to change your attitude because you can’t treat students like apprentices on a building site ... they’re way too sensitive for that. You need to change your approach and your manner, be less aggressive [than on a building site].

The participants articulated a wide range of reasons for entering teaching. They tended to have more than one motive. Most mentioned reasons of both altruism and self-interest. Participants spoke about a sense of vocation, of giving something back, passing on knowledge, contributing to trade education as a whole. But also back or knee problems, wanting to spend more time with family and wanting a change in career.

They all suggested that becoming a teacher was an ‘evolution’, ‘building still defines the essential being but I am certainly a professional educator’. For Karl it felt seamless, ‘I can’t really say when I felt like I was becoming a teacher, I guess I took it in my stride and enjoyed the feedback from the students to say I was doing a good job, making a difference. That’s why I’m still doing it’.

Barry said that from the start he felt like a teacher, ‘however as an educator it has only been over the last 10 or so years that the bias has moved from trade knowledge to pedagogical principles’.

What trade educators do – renailing

In the conversations around ‘what they do?’ participants ventured into a wide variety of domains. Their responses were detailed. In general, participants did not talk about standards or units, although one spoke specifically about assessment. All spoke at length and in detail about what it is to be a carpenter and what it means to teach that trade in the widest possible sense. They all talked about how they learnt and their early experiences as an apprentice, with two of them mentioning specific ‘mentors’.

In this context, participants discussed family, livelihoods, traditions, what children learn from their parents, teaching someone an ‘honourable way to make a living’, ‘sustaining the skills of the trade’ and learning to do something

‘properly’, teaching a ‘worthwhile trade’, being shown the ‘correct methods’, and the ‘safe way’ to do a job.

Bill discussed the idea that there is more to learning a trade than a set of skills,

... [it] becomes the core bedrock that holds you together in good stead as you go through life. You get a lot of values – you get a lot of positive values, you never deviate from – and it starts right from the beginning. We change our young boys into young men and good citizens.

The idea of learning the trade as a long process emerged in discussions. Most participants discussed the idea of ‘taking time’; that learning can’t be rushed. Karl suggested that, “there is so much to learn, I say to them don’t try to learn everything at once”. This was emphasised by Bill who drew a diagram of how he sees the learning curve in carpentry. He suggested that learning to be a carpenter follows an exponential curve – it starts off slowly and increases until in their fourth year it all ‘clicks into place’; “people try to rush it but I don’t believe you can”. Ray suggests that “... it takes a long time, it took me years before it slipped into place, before I realised I knew what I was doing”.

Associated with this idea of ‘time’ is the apprenticeship tradition. It was only over a period of years that one was deemed to have developed sufficient skills and knowledge to be independently identified as a member of a particular trade. Further time was required to be able to teach others. In England, the English Statute of Artificers (1563) stated apprentices were required to serve seven years (Rorabaugh, 1988). More recently, apprenticeships in New Zealand have tended to be three years. Apprentices are identified as those ‘doing their time’. In the traditional artisan culture, Rorabaugh (1988) suggests that “status was a function of age, and over time one’s status changed as [one] moved from an apprentice, then a journeyman and finally a master” (p.166). Indeed, in order to ‘get their ticket’ apprentices had to ‘do their time’.

Connected to the idea of time was discussion about the ability to ‘know’: the aspect of a trade that can’t necessarily be taught and isn’t necessarily visible, like ‘knowing immediately that [something] isn’t right’, that which ‘comes from experience’, and ‘takes time’ to develop, where ‘you get a feeling for it.’

Participants talked also about the importance of learning to read plans, of being able to use tools and power tools correctly, but also highlighted the ‘need to see the big picture’. Bryan suggested that learning about carpentry and construction is about learning about the bigger process. As Bryce suggests, “They need to be involved in the bigger picture – knowing that this is the house that we are going to build, this is where it is on the site, this is where we are and this is what we are going to go through to get there over the next 12 or 14 weeks”.

Participants talked about the balance between practical and theoretical knowledge and the importance of industry exposure to attain a deeper understanding of construction.

Participants in general stated that their work as tutors/teachers was different to the role of a workplace trainer. They offered a number of reasons for this: Karl suggested that as tutors in an ITP (Institute of Technology and Polytechnic) they had access to more teaching based resources and a ‘community’ of tutors who shared knowledge about teaching and carpentry: “I think we can teach, we have time to prepare, to think about how we will teach something”.

Karl identified a clear difference between those who ‘train’ and those who ‘teach’. Trades educators, he suggested, have a “duty of care” as teachers and as tradespeople, “We have a thing called pastoral care which I think is a huge part of what we do as educators”, “we treat students as individuals ... we don’t just give them a box of books and tick the boxes” which is what he suggests much training is about in the modern training environment.

DISCUSSION

There is no suggestion that we can singularly identify trades educators as having some overriding set of characteristics. As individuals working in the area of vocational education there are many differences. However findings from interviews suggest that there is a strong identity and singular clarity about their role as a trades educator in terms of ‘occupational identity’.

This suggests that the ‘confusion’ outlined by Haycock and Kelly (2009) and the ‘inherent tensions’ in the ‘dual occupational identities’ of tertiary trades educators may be more symptomatic of complications that arise from the distinctly different pedagogical fields and different ‘forms’ of pedagogical practise between teacher educators and trade educators.

Some preliminary findings from the study confirm that carpentry educators strongly identify as both educators and as carpenters. They have clarity about what they do and a commonality in terms of how they see what they do. It is clear that the occupational group ‘carpenter’ carries with it some strong sense of the identity of being a carpenter that is developed through a particular model of learning over a period of time.

At a time when trades education is being ‘re-thought’ and redeveloped for a modern educational environment, signature pedagogies can provide an entrance to understanding and appreciating the pervasive elements and characteristics related to the teaching of a trade. The three-way model that includes the “habits of the mind, habits of the heart, and habits of the hand” (Shulman, 2005, p. 59) associated with teaching in a specific field seem to be understood by trade educators. They are yet to be recognised by teacher educators or incorporated into notions of ‘good teaching’ in the trade education environment.

It is suggested that for those within vocational education:

The challenge ... is to create new notions of professional identity that respond to a new set of education challenges in new times that move beyond a reductionist and instrumental view of teaching and practice.

Kell (2004, p.3)

This challenges both educators and teacher developers to cultivate collaborative relationships that problematise the ‘confusion and contradiction’ thus acknowledging the possibility that the ‘problem’ of dual occupational identity might be a result of fixed notions of what constitutes good teaching.

At a time of change, when issues of curriculum and practice are discussed, managed and altered by Industry Training Organisations (ITOs), policy makers, Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs), and Standard Setting Boards (SSBs), trades educators remain in the background. It is suggested that further

exploration of 'located aspects of the human condition from the inside' (Willis & Trondman, 2002), presented through an investigation into signature pedagogies in trades education, will provide an opportunity for trades educators to be recognised as legitimate practitioners. An appreciation for the specific pedagogies of the trades will provide the conditions for 'collective agency', and 'collective action' (Seddon, 2008) and contribute to reasoned debate that will contribute to improved understanding and a more democratic environment in the contested field of vocational education.

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