



# Discipline-based Teaching and Identity Expansion – Teacher Education and the Tertiary Vocational Educator in New Zealand

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## ABSTRACT

*The vocational tertiary teaching work force in New Zealand is made up of individuals from an extensive range of occupational backgrounds. When their occupational or discipline-based expertise is employed within Institutes of Technology and Polytechnics (ITPs) and Private Training Establishments (PTEs) they make up another occupational group – that of vocational education or training practitioner. With diverse work-based backgrounds, vocational educators undertake their work within the teaching workforce often without a strong sense of their educational position or function and there is little guidance in the complexities and realities of the role. This paper considers the role of vocational educators and the practices of professional development or tertiary teacher education that might support building a multi-layered identity encompassing their discipline expertise and their role as an educator.*

## INTRODUCTION

The work of a vocational educator largely takes place in the post-compulsory education sector in New Zealand. This includes academic, vocational and further education provision. Many have closer affiliations with their industry or profession and identify more closely with their particular discipline than they do with the field of education or teaching. The field within which they were initially trained or educated forms an important part of their occupational identity (Seddon, 2009) and if there is to be a successful shift of identity to teaching practitioner of that discipline, accompanied by the relevant skills and expertise to become effective educators, then it is necessary to acknowledge: a) the importance of the role from which they have come; b) the challenges of the role into which they are becoming acculturated; and, c) the complexities of the scenario for identity formation.

Tertiary vocational teacher education provides a formal transition from industry expert to teaching professional. It requires some careful consideration of both what the role involves and how to best prepare educators for the rigours of that role in a complex and constantly changing environment.

The task of developing effective teacher education programmes for vocational educators is a complex one. There are the pragmatic issues of timing and engagement, the development concerns of fostering a multi-faceted identity, and ensuring that the relevant educational skills and knowledge are advanced. There is also the matter of ensuring that educators can contribute their expertise, creativity and commitment to social justice within their programmes.

## **TERTIARY VOCATIONAL EDUCATORS**

Vocational educators in Institutes of Technology (ITPs) are often referred to as vocational tutors but are also known as teachers, educators, lecturers, trainers and instructors. Some refer to themselves as facilitators, some also prefer to be identified as a member of their former occupation or discipline. The transfer of identity from discipline expert to educator goes further than the uncertain nominal terminology. How and with whom vocational educators entrust their work-life identity, what they call themselves and how this is recognized and developed within a work environment can determine how successful their work as educators will be.

Many tertiary teachers move into teaching roles directly from industry. Often their introduction to the teaching role takes place while they are embedded in the work of teaching. Recruited on the basis of their industry knowledge and qualifications, they are usually strong industry practitioners. However, many have limited knowledge relating to theories of learning and strategies for teaching and can be pedagogically ill-equipped to embark on the demands of teaching and the complexity of this educational environment.

There is no legislative requirement for tertiary teachers in New Zealand to undergo teacher training or education before they begin their work as educators. Within the level 1-3 tertiary educational environment some standard setting boards outline minimal requirements for individual unit standards, most notably in assessment, or the National Certificate in Adult Literacy (NCAL) at level 4 or 5 or for a Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. Qualifications do exist at higher levels for tertiary educators but there are no minimum standards for teaching qualifications in this sector.

There are few opportunities in the everyday work-life of educators in ITPs to 'take stock' of their role as an educator within their discipline. Often the everyday working environment physically resembles the industry or professional environment from which they have come, specifically, workshops, restaurants, salons, offices and construction sites. In many cases the occupational cultures of the discipline have been directly transferred into the polytechnic or training environment. There can be few external clues and cues to support an emergent identity as educator.

## **QUALITY EDUCATION AND THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATOR**

The educator role is not straightforward. Vocational educators take on many and varied roles within their educational work – they are mentors, industry trainers, safety advisors, workplace advisors, verifiers, assessors. They require a range of skills in a range of areas in order to be effective as educators. However, the increasing tendency to view vocational educators as deliverers of

content and verifiers for industry-based assessment has led to the view of the training and professional development of vocational educators as a process for the acquisition of pre-packaged competencies (Atkins, 2011) rather than the development of fluid and flexible knowledge sets that make it possible for the creation and development of responsive learning designs.

Liz Atkins (2011, p. 2) describes a similar climate in the Further Education sector in the UK – a sector which shares similar student profiles to those in level 1-3 courses in New Zealand:

... the detailed and prescriptive competency-based structure of contemporary teacher training in the FE sector, together with wider regulation ... is productive of teachers who are instrumental and conformist but who lack the knowledge to engage with the concerns for social justice which are fundamental to working in the FE sector.

The centrality of the teaching role and therefore the training or education of educators or trainers as educators or trainers is implicit in any discussion about quality education. Quality education is a central goal in the New Zealand Tertiary Education Strategy (2010-2015) and is referred frequently in terms of equitable outcomes and student progression either to work or higher levels of study. It is suggested in the Tertiary Education Strategy (2010-2015) that 'high quality tertiary education is central to helping New Zealand achieve its .... goals' (p. 3), that quality of provision is essential to effectiveness (p. 6) and that quality teaching and learning is linked to completion rates (p. 13).

It is recognised that the quality of teaching in the tertiary environment is a vital influencing factor for completion of studies and achievement (Taafe & Cunningham, 2005). It is acknowledged that teacher quality makes a difference to student learning (Beaty, 1998; Goe, 2007; Hattie, 2003) and that there is a link between effective teaching and effective student learning (Pithers & Holland, 2002). However, little work has been undertaken to identify what quality teaching in the New Zealand vocational sector might entail and how this might inform programmes for teacher education or training.

Robertson (2009) suggests that high quality learning opportunities for students in vocationally-based programmes require that educators have a range of skills and knowledge in a range of areas. A scan of the literature in this area suggests that the skill and knowledge range for educators engaging in quality education in a vocational context could fit into three main categories: content or discipline-based knowledge and skills (Figgis, 2009; Hillier 2009; Lynch, 1997; Pithers & Holland, 2002); pedagogical understandings relating to the teaching of those particular skills and knowledge (Beaty, 1998; Smittle, 2003; Swain & Swan, 2009); as well as, the skills and knowledge associated with how to relate to and work with their students (Borko, 2004; Boud, 1993; Ellington, 2000; Kane et al., 2004; Smittle, 2003).

Thus the transfer from discipline expert to successful teacher of the discipline is one which involves an understanding of both content, pedagogical principles and how those pedagogical principles apply to the content which is being taught. This requires a deep understanding of the content and how to make it understandable to others in a particular context.

While each of these areas represents important features which are evident in quality education, Schulman (2005) suggests that pedagogical content knowledge is one of the most vital aspects of successful teaching. Pedagogical content knowledge is the understandings which educators have about teaching their discipline which enables them to make ideas accessible to others. Pedagogical content knowledge, as one of the key areas identified within a successful teaching framework, then, is suggested as a starting point for the work of the vocational educator.

While it is acknowledged that many vocational educators engage in practices which demonstrate understandings of pedagogical content knowledge it is also recognised that these understandings may not have been iterated in the language of teaching. We also understand that many vocational educators are reluctant to engage in academic discussions relating to their pedagogical framework. The truth is academic educational language is not within their area of expertise, yet. While they are experts in their field, well versed in the language of their discipline, the language of education is one in which they find themselves novices. Many may reject or resist the use of educational language and theory (Leach, 2011) especially as it relates to their own work.

## **WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THE VOCATIONAL EDUCATOR?**

We suggest that the role of the educational practitioner in a vocational environment involves the crafting and delivery of high quality learning and teaching environments and programmes – the ability to teach a discipline to a group of students in a specific environment that allows those students to be successful in that context. If we identify the work of vocational educators as more complex than the transmission of existing skills and knowledge to units of labour for a ready-to-go workforce then the work of teacher education or development is somewhat more complex than the training of skills in the processes for delivery and assessment. Thus, rather than engaging in the training of educators as non-autonomous, non-agentic deliverers of pre-packaged standards the door is opened to a transformative, whole, educative experience.

It is our suggestion that teacher education programmes are more likely to be successful when they acknowledge the contextual basis for teaching where there is less likelihood of a direct challenge to or minimisation of discipline-based knowledge. It is suggested that pedagogical work for educators undertaken in a contextual way will be more likely to cohabit with discipline expertise. The work of teacher education and development, then, becomes more a process of drawing out rather than shaping, replacing or fixing.

Hodkinson (1998) suggests that educator development and professionalism is connected to the development of identity, autonomy and agency which is built through theory building, reflection, collaboration and discourse building. We suggest that the fostering of the development of a multi-faceted teacher identity based within a context beyond the simple deliverer of others' designs is essential.

## **ROLE AND IDENTITY**

There is a vast literature considering the development of 'Identity'. Gee (2000) proposes that identity is multi-dimensional and that its various parts interact for groups and individuals in both common and unique ways.

In the context of teacher education, acknowledging the tensions across different elements of identity becomes important to achieving a successful expansion of self-identity. This is especially so for vocational educators whose identity as an expert in a trade or vocation is sustained and may be in conflict with the 'discourse identity' (Gee, 2000, p. 100) within an institution or educational organisation. Particular institutional faculties may focus more on disciplinary expertise, where 'affinity identity' (p. 100) is highlighted through trade or professional affiliations. This may conflict with the institutional identity which is often set in place by educational managers or leaders. Gee suggests that discourse provides a way of defining identity; the language used, a system through which people negotiate meaning to identity themselves and others.

Thus, the importance of discourse building in any training or development that is concerned with expanding the idea of identity from discipline expert to discipline-based educational expert requires the building of knowledge and understanding within the area of discipline-based educational practices and also collaboration with other educators, possibly from other disciplines. The development of educational identity is, in large part, a result of the opportunities to develop educational ideas and pedagogies which emerge through discourse. Here, the building of knowledge and theory relating to teaching has a strong part to play in teacher education.

Teacher education and professional development that aims to build self-directed, autonomous and agentic professional decision-making as opposed to copyist, disembodied processes for education such as assessor, deliverer of unit standards, must facilitate the establishment of an educator with pedagogical content knowledge. The educator disempowerment that goes with requiring directed and non-contextual transmission of information as 'teaching' and the inevitable suppression of discipline-based expertise is thus to be challenged in any teacher education programme for vocational educators

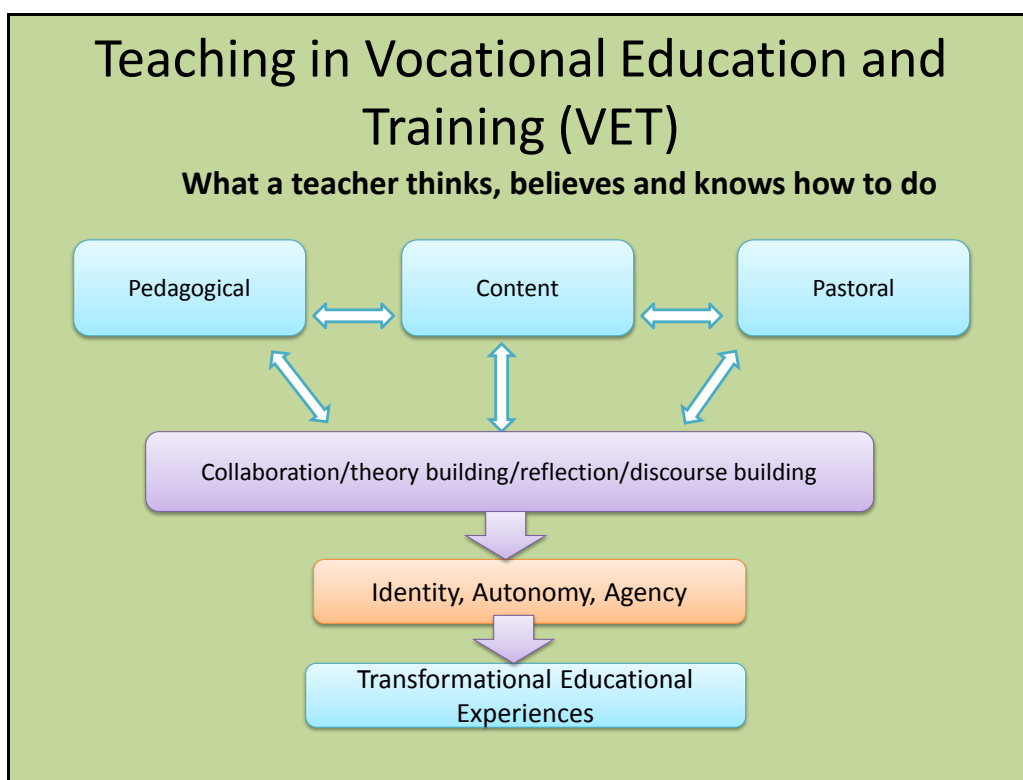
## **CONCEPTUALISING THE WORK – A PRECURSOR TO PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT**

It is relevant that the way in which we conceptualize the role of the vocational educator forms the basis for the development of teacher education or professional development programmes.

With the inclusion of a teacher education requirement in the redevelopment of career paths for vocational educators at a large urban Institute of Technology, we embarked on a series of discussions relating to the design of a new level 5 Certificate in Tertiary Teaching. Our focus in developing a new programme was to draw from sources that extended the idea of a professional teaching identity rather than the development or training which emphasised instruction in individual processes.

We were committed to supporting the pedagogical development as well as the broader knowledge of participants as discipline experts. We wanted to avoid the training of educators in disembodied processes and procedures that provided minimal competency to the role of teaching. This commitment included the assumption that teacher identity and contextually-based pedagogical knowledge would be developing concurrently.

As a model for our work we developed a framework, based on the three ideas outlined above, to conceptualise the work of the vocational educator as threefold. We then conceptualized our own work as that which develops the three-way model to support identity building and the development of autonomous, agentic professionals. The diagram below represents a framework for Vocational Education and Training (VET) teaching and the work of teacher education.



**Figure 1.** The vocational educators’ role in transformational educational experiences

**PROGRAMME DEVELOPMENT AND THE ‘PROBLEM OF THEORY’**

Using our model as a framework to guide the development of the programme, we developed graduate profile principles that outlined a view of teaching in a 21<sup>st</sup> century vocational tertiary environment as active, socially responsible and responsive within the boundaries of formal learning (from the Manukau Institute of Technology, Graduate Profile, Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, 2011):

Teaching is making a series of decisions, implementing those decisions and evaluating those decisions in the context of a formally approved programme.

Responsible teaching/decision making is principled when the focus is on optimizing effective learning opportunities for the student.

Teacher education is about engagement with theory, establishment of models, identification and response to learning contexts and growth in professional judgment.

Providing ongoing opportunities for engagement with broad theory, critical discussion and practice informed by experience were identified as key features to support the learning and for realising the capabilities within the profile. Engaging tertiary teachers in theory is highlighted as a way to 'inform, justify, challenge and shape teachers' personal theories and practice' (Leach, 2011, p 80). However, as outlined by Leach (2011), pedagogical theory is problematic for many new teaching practitioners, especially if the discipline from which they have arrived has a certain opposition to that which might be perceived as impractical and unrealistic academic theory.

It was a significant challenge to establish ways of building theory given this antipathy. 'Training' or teacher education that is limited to providing practices to copy, without enabling participants to create, design, respond and transform, has been described as disempowering, leaving the workforce without the ability to defend itself against demands that limit development and deny teachers' knowledge as a valuable contribution (Gee, Hull & Lankshear, 1996).

The importance of ensuring that teachers have access to theory to provide frameworks for discussion – to critique, predict and challenge – was thus well acknowledged in our discussions. Fullan (1993) offers some thinking to address the issue of how to build this into teacher education. His work suggests that effective engagement with theory and theory building follows actual experience and the opportunity to reflect on that experience. The concept of 'disruption' (Christensen, 2011) is useful here, where teachers may engage in experiences that are surprising and challenging as part of building their professional identity as teachers and then building the theories that underpin that identity.

We embarked on a series of discussions relating to the design of courses that would encourage a practice-based approach to theory building and that avoided the direct challenge of developing notions of teacher identity. We acknowledged that while many potential participants were likely to be novice teachers they were experts within their discipline and this knowledge within their context was part of their identity and entwined with their developing notions of teaching identity.

Thus, the goal was to enhance the opportunities for 'praxis' without negating or minimising the expertise of industry-garnered knowledge or experience. We were aware of some of the issues of the industry-teaching nexus; the devaluing of knowledge that some discipline educators experience when confronted with pedagogical theory and the alienation that can result as

well as the challenge of overcoming the industry-based competency models which some educators had been trained in either as students or industry-based tutors/assessors.

However in a modern ITP, where encounters with worthwhile learning experiences are central to student engagement and achievement we were also aware that our work within the institute was to expose new educators to alternative teaching possibilities and to supply tools which would engage educators in critical discussion to support decision-making. Similarly, it was part of our work to provide new teachers with appropriate and relevant teacher education/professional development that moved them beyond teaching the way they were taught and challenged the view of vocational education as narrow, outcome-based delivery of competencies.

In practice this meant attending to some key assumptions about how teacher education should be delivered and challenging them with practices that aligned with the context of industry experts with limited teacher education already teaching. We expected that the task of vocational teacher education was to enable teachers to build a triple-layered or three-dimensional identity (Anderson & Maurice-Takerei, 2012), encompassing discipline expert, the teaching practitioner and the contributor to the transformation of lives through education. Further, this work had to attend to the multiple tensions derived from the teachers' immediate context that impacted on the process of developing a different and evolving identity.

An outline of learning, therefore encompasses:

1) *Experience*

Proximity of own and others experience, and  
Disruptive experiences.

2) *Reflection*

Time for reflection on experience, and  
Opportunity to reflect with others.

3) *Theory*

Establishment of the key questions (Personal theory building),  
Engagement with existing theory (Links to wider theory and a  
wider community of thought), and  
Building own theories embedded in context or discipline.

This approach outlines the idea that teacher education in this sector is most effective if it is connected to the educators' current teaching environment; that well-spaced sessions provide the opportunity for a 'discussion, practice and reflection cycle' to run; and, that processes of reflection structured into delivery and assessment, linked to wider theory, research and practice (Anderson & Maurice-Takerei, 2012) will provide opportunities for educators to make sense of their work and facilitate an emerging identity. The structuring into the course of experience and reflection on experience can generate a pathway into discussion of wider theory as well as support the building of individual theory.

Taking into account that professional learning, whether formal or informal, has a responsibility to be useful we employed Sachs (2007) 'Litmus



Test for Professional Learning or Development' for teachers. We discussed this with the course participants at the start and invited ongoing comment. The litmus test is as follows: 'Is it useful? Does it improve my practice? Does it improve student learning? Does it extend me intellectually, personally or professionally? Does it question orthodoxies, generate new knowledge or transform practice? (p. 10).

## **A WAY FORWARD?**

Finally, optimism about a shift from the technician or instrumental approach towards something that has the characteristics of a professional and value-driven approach to vocational teacher education came with the introduction of a Self Evaluation model of quality assurance by NZQA in 2009. The KEQs (Key Evaluative Questions) focused on the quality and relevance of learning and teaching. Robust evidence was required and a continuous improvement cycle was seen to underpin the process. Significant change in the quality of the student experience, however, is less driven by monitoring and more by the innovation of teachers enabled by this approach (Harvey & Newton, 2004). Implementation of this quality assurance process to replace the previous audit model would assume professional, high quality teacher education for the teachers working under this system given the high levels of professional judgment called for, the principled and evidenced decision making, and the level of individual and team responsibility assumed for student outcomes.

While NZQA began on an innovative and challenging pathway, it has failed to use its position or persuasive powers to influence policy to resource excellent teacher education for the vocational sector in New Zealand, supported by future-directed research and effective practice development. This task stays with individual organisations.

An understanding of contextual and discipline-based pedagogies and consideration of how this links to occupational identity in vocational education can be a precursor to the development of programmes focused on responsible and critical pedagogical decision-making which can lead to quality education outcomes. This is linked to an acknowledgement that novice vocational educators are in the process of expanding their occupational identity (not replacing it) and institutions and teacher educators might work with the idea of development and expansion rather than modification; co-operation rather than competition in identity building. If, as suggested, this is achieved through experience, reflection and theory building and via a discursive environment then we are less likely to develop cookie-cutter deliverers of content than we are to encourage principled, capable and informed educators with a broad understanding of the transformational opportunities within their work.

Continued discussions about the role of vocational educators, the nature of their work and how their work links to quality learning and teaching experiences and results in a high quality workforce, is a first step to developing an educator workforce capable of the demands of this complex role.

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