Constructing the curricula: national curricula, teachers' practice and change

This paper examines assumptions behind contemporary curriculum practice in adult and vocational education. It argues that the current approach to the regulation of curricula through highly prescriptive, centrally-determined national curriculum documentation is flawed in its assumptions about the way individuals construct knowledge and act. The paper describes the current curricula approach being adopted by federal and state governments. It is held that such an approach is not sympathetic to the way individuals construct knowledge and adopt innovations. Characteristics of a curricula process which is more sympathetic to pressing individuals into constructing knowledge are advanced using a socio-cultural approach to constructivism. Means of securing curriculum change which are sympathetic to this constructivist perspective are then proposed.

Stephen Billett
School of Vocational, Community
and Technology Education
Griffith University

Published in New Horizons in Education, (1995) 92 pp30-45

1. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW
In order to achieve its policy objectives of a uniform national provision of vocational education, the governmental reform process - the national training agenda - is utilising centrally-derived, highly prescriptive and standardised national syllabi. This strategy is based on the assumption that these curriculum documents will be interpreted and implemented with fidelity and uniformity throughout the range of adult and vocational education settings, eg. TAFE, Skillshare, state high schools. Yet, initiatives such as the development of national competency standards, upon which the national syllabi are based, are developed and implemented with minimal input from vocational educators. Within this approach to curriculum development, vocational teachers are viewed as being mere implementers of curricula generated and regulated by others. Accreditation arrangements are used to monitor and regulate vocational education provisions in an attempt to underpin the goal of the delivery of standardised instruction. Such an approach to the organisation of work activity has antecedents which illuminate the intentions of its sponsors. In an earlier time, "scientific management" or Taylorism was introduced with the primary aim of securing control of the means of production, rather than being initially concerned with productivity. Similarly, current vocational educational policy is pre-occupied with measures for accountability and control, rather than achieving the sort of learning outcomes which will secure government's stated policy objectives - a skilled and highly adaptable workforce (Dawkins, 1988). There seems to be little questioning in policy arenas about whether standardised outcomes of vocational education are either desirable or achievable. It seems curious that in the pursuit of developing the flexibility and adaptability of the nation's workforce, that the focus of the educational effort is on teaching...
the same content to all students, regardless of context or application, with the expressed intent of achieving uniform behavioural outcomes. This circumstance is made more curious given the paucity of evidence to support assumptions that these measures will secure what governments intend (Jackson, 1993; Stevenson, 1993).

Yet, even if a uniform provision of behavioural outcomes was desirable, how achievable is such an objective? Individuals do not construct meaning in uniform ways and respond to situations in the same way. It is advanced in this paper, that the separation of teachers and trainers from the curriculum decision-making process is unlikely to result in the changes in practice through the reform agenda which sponsors desire. It is held that, despite all the regulatory mechanisms and standardised documentation that are currently being deployed by governments, the goal of a standard provision of curricula is unachievable as the construction of teachers' knowledge is more complex and diverse than is acknowledged by such measures. Assumptions underpinning these measures conflict with current research and theorising about how teachers' construct knowledge, and act in everyday practice. What evidence is there that such documentation will have a privileged status over what vocational teachers and trainers do in their daily practice? It is proposed in this paper that, assumptions about the ways to influence teachers to change their curricula practice needs to be re-conceptualised and re-appraised if curricula change is to be achieved. Unless processes of curricula development takes account of how teachers and trainers construct knowledge and act, worthwhile and socially-just curriculum initiatives will also fail to be adopted in practice.

2. Current curricula practice: top-down and regulatory

As stated above, the decision-making mechanisms of the government managed vocational education system are founded on a belief that it is possible to regulate how teachers conduct their practice, and indeed, how and what students will learn by means of highly prescriptive syllabus documents and associated regulatory procedures (National Training Board, 1992). Syllabi and other forms of curriculum documentation, such as module writers' manuals and assessment processes, are developed centrally with input from key industry stakeholders, and are then passed to vocational teachers, for implementation. Peak employer and employee representative bodies play a key decision-making role in the development of syllabi, utilising a framework laid down by government, including the mandatory competency-based training methodology. The development of syllabi is linked to national competency standards, where they exist, and these are usually content-focussed, reflecting the interests and values of industry stakeholders. External "gate-keeping" is enforced at a state level with the accreditation of courses demanding that documentation reflect the requisite stakeholders' views on content and outcomes, and the mandatory
competency-based format.

Teachers in TAFE and Skillshare, industry trainers, those practitioners who will ultimately implement and evaluate the syllabi, are excluded from the development process. Consequently, teachers and trainers are denied the sort of collaborative and discretionary arrangements which underpin another key government initiatives, workplace reform. Instead, teachers and trainers are cast in the role of mere implementers of curriculum developed elsewhere, are granted the minimum responsibility and involvement in the curriculum development process, although held highly accountable for its implementation. Teachers' role is seen as merely passing on to students the content included in the syllabus. In such a 'top-down' model of curriculum development and implementation, teachers are expected to exercise their skills and efforts to implement syllabi with uniformity and fidelity. Although it is true that teachers have no historical right to exercise control over curricula (Skilbeck, 1984), there is ample evidence to suggest that unless they are given a decision-making role, particularly with implementation, the developers' intentions are unlikely to be realised (Fullan, 1985; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Despite the efforts of highly prescriptive and centrally-derived curricula, teachers and trainers will always play a key role within curricula and attempts to exclude or ignore them are unlikely to be successful.

Current practice in vocational education: a Taylorist approach

The current emphasis on externally-generated documents and associated regulatory processes suggests a greater concern with achieving administrative goals of accountability (Jackson, 1993) than engendering improved curricula practice. As a result, parallels with Taylor's scientific management are hard to avoid given the pre-occupation with control over the activities of vocational teachers and trainers. The use of top-down, highly prescriptive uniform syllabi designed by others makes for ease of comparison between current measures in curriculum development and this mode of work organisation. This intent is articulated by Taylor who stated that:

Under scientific management the 'initiative' of the workmen [sic] (that is their hard work, their goodwill, and their ingenuity) is obtained with absolute uniformity...... (Taylor, 1967:36)

Braverman (1974) provides a useful set of principles by which the character of scientific management, can be delineated and used to evaluate workpractice. The first principle is the separation of the labour process from the skills of workers. In separating the development of curricula from teachers, there is a conscious effort to remove the decision-making from teachers, placing it instead in the hands of remote distant stakeholders and policy-makers, who aim to control vocational education. The potential outcome is the deskilling and disempowerment of vocational educators. The second principle is the removal of
conception from execution, which is evident in current practice with teachers being placed purely in the role of implementers, rather than developers or researchers (Marland, cited in Print, 1987). Braverman's (1974) third principle is the systematic control extended by management over each phase of the labour process. Each step of the vocational curricula process is carefully managed, from the development of national competency standards, to syllabi development which reflects those standards, the mandatory use of rigid accreditation procedures and the competency-based methodology, which focuses on pre-specified outcomes, and can be used to measure teachers and students alike in quite superficial ways. Given the parallels with Taylorism, it seems curious that trade unions are participating in these industry-based curricula arrangements which deliberately aim to inhibit, deskill and marginalise teachers.

Adopting innovation - curricula change

The literature on the adaptation of change provides other insights which question the utility of highly prescriptive syllabi. This literature suggests that change in curricula practice is not something which can be achieved without consent or participation by those effected by the change process. Externally-generated initiatives which deny the opportunity for collaborative planning have little chance of being implemented (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Teachers simply do not see themselves as being ordered by a complex bureaucracy whose policies are to be unquestioningly implemented (Common, 1983:205). Adopting innovations in practice is concerned with individual decision-making and consent (Doyle & Ponder, 1977-78), the very qualities which have been marginalised in current curriculum practice. Fullan (1985) argues that practitioners have to be actively involved in the change process to gain the competencies to succeed with the innovation.

"...change at the individual level is a process whereby individuals alter their ways of thinking and doing. It is above all of finding new meaning and satisfaction in new ways of doing things."

(Fullan, 1985:396)

The consent of teachers to implement curricula is only likely to be gained when concerns about successful implementation of the curricula innovation have been overcome and benefits, in terms of changing student outcomes, are evident (Guskey, 1986). Part of that success is dependent upon practitioners developing a rich conceptual understanding about the innovation (Ingvarson, 1987). Instead, the outcomes of the use of highly prescriptive syllabi over which practitioners have had no role in planning for its implementation will largely be restricted to public aspects of practice (Logan 1988:17), superficial matters (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978) and where such compliance suits individuals' dispositions.

The nature of teaching practice provides another variable which renders adaptation of change problematic.
Classrooms remain the private domain of teachers, a situation which has the potential to limit the direct and indirect external influences on practice. Consequently, individual practitioners are able to exercise a high degree of discretion in the privacy of their practice. Thus, for better or worse, teachers exercise greater license than in situations where practice is highly public and subject to direct influence of others. As Logan (1988) has noted, public aspects of practice are the most likely to change, albeit on a superficial level.

In sum, the literature on change in teachers' practice suggests that prescriptive curriculum documentation is unlikely to bring about the change intended by sponsors and designers. By adopting a regulatory approach to curricula development, contemporary curriculum practice within vocational education ignores the basis upon which individuals think, act and make decisions. To understand further how practice might be changed or developed, it is necessary to consider how individuals construct knowledge. In the next section, a view of how educational practitioners are likely to construct knowledge and adopt change is advanced, using the socio-cultural literature.

3. Constructing the curricula: an individual and socially-mediated perspective.

From a constructivist view, teachers' understanding and ability to secure goals is generated through what they experience (von Glasersfeld, 1987). The construction of knowledge is interpretative, with the construction of events, circumstances and other stimuli being fashioned by individuals' essentially idiosyncratic base of prior knowledge. This prior knowledge is shaped by their personal histories and epistemologies (Posner, 1982; Greeno, 1989). Individuals seek to 'make sense' or determine the viability of new experience by comparing it with what they already know (von Glasersfeld, 1987). Moreover, this construction is mediated by the values, norms and practices of the social and cultural context in which the knowledge is accessed (Lave, 1990; Rogoff, in print; Scribner, 1985). It is now commonly accepted that knowledge has social origins (Goodnow, 1990), with the particular practices individuals participate in offering rich sources of knowledge.

The particular social and cultural context can be conceptualised as a community of practice with its attendant norms, practices and values, the culture of practice (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989). Certain kinds of knowledge are privileged in a particular context, because they are highly valued and/or frequently accessed. However, the construction of knowledge is relational with individuals interpretatively constructing the nature of the practice, rather than practice being viewed as a totally objectified entity, which has the same meaning and elicits the same responses from all individuals (Posner, 1982). Therefore, learning is viewed as the appropriation of socially-determined knowledge (see Figure 1).
Appropriation is not just the internalisation of socially-sourced knowledge (Rogoff, in print) it is the process of making that knowledge one's own, to use Leonteyev's (1981) phrase.

This view of knowledge construction has direct consequences for teachers' practice. Curriculum development or change can be conceptualised as a general disembedded concept. However, it requires actual practice embedded in particular social circumstances for the particular meaning of practice to be realised (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Consider, for example, the community of practice which might be based around a particular TAFE college section or department. The nature of the particular practice is likely to be determined by factors such as direct associations amongst individuals within that setting, and the less direct influence of external factors, such as the local community, industry and bureaucracy. Vocational education provisions occur in a variety of settings, such as schools, private colleges, industry sites, TAFE colleges and annexes which are located in major cities, provincial centres or remote communities. Moreover, the diversity of students in such settings, for example those in schools, the employed, those seeking employment, those with recent success in formal learning, and those without such experiences, are some of the external factors which influence the nature of curriculum. In addition to these factors are the relationships within the culture of practice and the influences of the institution: the internal factors. The reason to draw attention to these various influences on practice is to suggest that a diversity of cultures of practice is likely to emerge from all these variables, with quite distinct consequences for curriculum practice.

It is also acknowledged that individuals engage in a number of communities (eg. family, work, social organisation) and influences of their cultures can overlap. For example, a teacher whose children are unemployed may bring special insights into the culture of practice about the needs of such students. However, in developing understanding and skills about teaching practice it is likely that the actual workplace culture of practice will offer a prime source of knowledge, as it is knowledge accessed in everyday practice in such settings. To attempt to apply uniform provisions, without taking into account the internal and external influence on the community of practice is to deny the very factors that influence the activity in those settings.

Given the forementioned social and individual mediation of influences on thinking and acting, an externally-derived and highly prescriptive syllabus would be subject to an appraisal of its viability at both a culture of practice and individual level. There seems little prospect of a curriculum document being...
implemented with a high degree of fidelity, unless the culture of practice and individuals’ interpretations are sympathetic to its form and objectives, and the teacher is able to enjoy viability in practice.

4. Developing the curricula: the practitioner's task

The questions addressed in this section are concerned with how curriculum innovations can be implemented to assist with the dual goals of changing practice and maintaining a desirable degree of the innovation's fidelity. It is proposed that curriculum innovations will only take on real meaning when applied in practice, and that expectations about the degree of uniformity and fidelity must be realistic, given the diverse nature of the particular practice. Moreover, without participation in the process and guidance about how to make new knowledge viable, the most likely outcome for teachers will be a rejection of innovations. This approach to curriculum development does not mean a severance from the demands of stakeholders and decision-makers, but acknowledges that practice, and judgement about it, will be determined within the circumstances of its application. The role for central stakeholders and policy-makers is to demonstrate the viability of curricula initiatives, rather than merely exhorting or regulating without offering evidence of how teachers should can and should integrate these innovations in their practice.

The constructivist view outlined above reflects the 'what is', rather than considering 'what should be'- in terms of developing teachers' practice. The community of practice, with its norms and practices offers the most likely source for individuals to construct knowledge and experience the viability of the knowledge's application. The most likely and practical prospects for change resides within three sources - collaborative action within a community of practice, external expertise, that acknowledges the exigencies of the particular practice, and newcomers.

Collaborative action

Only through active and collaborative participation in the curriculum planning within communities of practice are common goals likely to be achieved, because through such activities a shared, if not uniform, meaning is most likely to be achieved (Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989). This does not mean that the development of curriculum is necessarily remote from external influences, such as policy makers and other stake-holders, but that those influences be restricted to broader statements of intent or goals, rather than highly prescriptive and detailed statements of intent. Teachers will always be the ones to construct the detail of curriculum practice as they will, at best, adopt innovations and initiatives to the requirements of their particular community of practice. So approaches to curriculum development can best be characterised as an on-going process of negotiation and deliberation amongst practitioners (Laird &
Stevenson, 1993) in adopting externally-provided directions or statements of intent.

**Expertise accommodating the exigencies of the particular practice**

As foreshadowed earlier, the circumstances of curricula implementation are likely to be quite diverse, and expertise in realising effective arrangements is likely to be situationally specific. A key concern with the socio-cultural source of knowledge, is the acknowledgment of practices and values at the particular setting. In a study of workplace learning (Billett, 1992), it was reported that expertise from outside a culture was only valued when it could contribute some knowledge which could not be found in the particular practice. Consequently, expert guidance needs to address issues within the socio-cultural circumstances of that practice. Therefore, the contextual and cultural influences are acknowledged and the expertise is adapted to these conditions, rather than offering solutions at the general and disembodied level of practice, which may not be applicable. External expertise is valued only when it provides practitioners with the skills and abilities to successfully implement the innovation (McLaughlin & Marsh, 1978). Consequently, expert guidance may be required to assist practitioners with developing appropriate skills and understanding. Yet this expertise has to be viable within the particular requirements of a culture of practice, not at the level of abstracted and disembodied principles. An obvious source of expert guidance is from within the particular community of practice. Such expertise is likely to be aware of the means of securing change, once they are convinced of its viability.

**Newcomers**

According to socio-cultural theorists, insights provided by new members saves communities from becoming redundant (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This occurs in two ways, firstly the ‘old-timers’ have to justify their practices to ‘newcomers’, which demand that they be proven through practice. In essence, this means that the ‘old-timers’ have to demonstrate the viability of knowledge in practice. Secondly, there is a process of displacement of old-timers by new-comers who bring fresh insights. Yet the reality is that most cultures of practice occur in situations of unequal relationships amongst participants, with ‘old-timers’ dominating (Verdonick, Flapan, Schmidt & Weinstock, 1988). So, although newcomers can provide some means to develop the culture and enhance individuals' construction of knowledge, the limitations of these arrangement must be acknowledged. Within a staff room dominated by experienced teachers, a single newcomer may experience difficulty securing changes to norms and practices. However, newcomers provide the opportunity for the community to justify its approach and be challenged by other views. The openness of the community to external challenges and purposeful justifications may well determine its long-term viability.
CONCLUSION

In summary, what has been proposed in this paper is that teachers' curricula practice is unlikely to be shaped by the use of externally-generated curriculum documents. Rather, approaches to changing practice are sourced through individual teachers' construction of knowledge, mediated by the particular socio-cultural context in which teachers participate. This view suggests greater discretion and decision-making should be extended to teachers to enhance the prospect of curriculum development. The change and curriculum development literature also holds that, unless individuals are involved in collaborative processes which recognise that the source of successful implementation resides with communities of practice and individuals, the development and implementation of intended curriculum initiatives is likely to be jeopardised. Consequently, approaches to curriculum development and innovations need to account for these concerns.

It would seem that the existing practice of attempting to control the curricula by means of external documents and regulatory process will be unsuccessful, except in superficial ways. It is likely that there will be an increasing gulf between the intended curricula, in the form of syllabus and regulatory measures, and the realised curriculum which occurs in the community and practice of vocational educators. Rather, an approach has to be undertaken which recognises the need to view curriculum development to be addressed at the community and individual level, although with guidance, collaboration and support from key stakeholders. Therefore, at the core of the curriculum development and change are individual teachers and the constructions they fashion.
References


Jackson, N. (1993). If competence is the answer what is the question? Australian and New Zealand Journal of Vocational Education Research, 1 (1), 46-60.


Figure 1. Constructing knowledge through socio-cultural mediation

Socio-historically derived knowledge
At a general level in the community

Knowledge privileged in particular ways by a community of practice
Leads to particular norms, values & practices

Individuals' appropriation of knowledge

Individuals' interaction with and interpretation of the community of practice premised on their:

- standing in the community;
- personal histories, and;
- personal dispositions.