

What does “scholarly practice” mean to TAFE teachers and in mixed sector institutions generally? How can a culture of scholarly practice be established to benefit both VET and higher education teachers?

Abstract

Whilst Technical and Further Education (TAFE) NSW is mindful that there is no advantage in competing with existing universities, the strategy behind its higher education agenda is to deliver applied and associate degrees in niche disciplines. This is seen not only as an opportunity to extend pathways for existing students, but also to attract new students who may not have considered university study before.

Although the delivery of degree programs by non-traditional providers is not new, what has come to light is the scarcity of scholarly activity underpinning higher education in the Vocational Education and Training (VET) sector. International and Australian evidence suggests that higher education teachers in vocational colleges are developing a distinctive version of scholarship that does not align with traditional expectations. The concept of scholarship which informs the work of academics in universities is not replicated in TAFE; it is nevertheless a requirement of non-university higher education providers. The research behind this paper sought to discover, by surveying teachers across two faculties, what they understand by the term *scholarly practice* and whether they perceive a difference in the scholarly practice of higher education and VET teachers. Finally, it argues that although scholarship is traditionally the domain of higher education, its implementation in TAFE should benefit both higher education and vocational teachers.

1. Introduction and context

TAFE NSW teachers have shown interest and enthusiasm in being involved in the higher education program planning, development and delivery. However, despite this, teachers are beginning to experience tension as they try to operate in a sector that is not designed to support this delivery. This is inevitable since the environment they are in has a strong tradition of vocational training. Furthermore, the industrial environment and the workplace culture within which it operates are not necessarily conducive to the requirements of higher education teaching.

External accrediting authorities require that the organisation demonstrate how scholarship is supported by the organisation and practised by the teachers. However, the concept of scholarship has not yet been clearly defined for this new breed of higher education teacher. This paper surveyed teachers' understanding of the term *scholarly practice* in relation to teaching and learning, and how this understanding aligned with the literature. It also sought their suggestions for organisational enablers which would support scholarly practice.

2. Literature review

The traditional expectation of teaching and research has been debated before and after Boyer (1990) coined the term *scholarship of teaching*, and proposed that universities look beyond these two pillars of academic life (McKinney, 2007). His call to extend the definition to include discovery, integration and application is well known, and provided the impetus for ongoing refinement of the definition.

Shulman (1998) suggested that in order for an activity to earn the label of a work of scholarship, it must be public, open to critical review, and available to members of the scholarly community. Glassick, Huber and Maeroff (1997) sought to recognise scholarship across a variety of academic activities. They claimed that every aspect of scholarly activity deserves merit as long as it is performed expertly.

Brew (2010) discovered that a common perception was that "scholarship is a quality" and means being absolutely thorough and rigorous in all aspects of work and that the

work be informed by “specialist knowledge and skills” (p. 108). Whilst initially the level of scholarly activity was measured by the extent of research and number of papers published, the term has gradually broadened to encompass various activities in higher education, and this is precisely what Boyer intended. Evidence of scholarship by non-university higher education providers does not necessarily align with that of traditional universities. However, there is no denying that valuable scholarly activities do occur in TAFE, as evidenced by research completed by Blecich and Kelly (2011).

Wheelahan, Moodie, Billet, and Kelly (2009) argue that TAFE higher education teachers working in both the vocational and higher education sectors are experiencing anxiety associated with identity resulting from being physically located in the vocational training environment where there is no history or expectation of scholarly practice as defined in the traditional university. Parry, Davies and Williams (as cited in Goulding & Seddon, 2011) describe scholarly activities in VET higher education as taking a “hybrid form” (p. 2). They argue that this is a positive thing and should remove the need for these new providers to prove their scholarly activities in the same way as universities.

3. Methodology

The methodology used for this study consisted of a questionnaire using SurveyMonkey as the survey tool. It consisted of nine questions – seven required the selection of the most appropriate option via the use of radio buttons, and two were open-ended questions for free text.

The scope of this research was restricted to a survey of all teachers in two faculties currently delivering degree programs, and all assistant faculty directors at a metropolitan TAFE institute. The survey was sent to 1200 staff. To avoid confusion with TAFE generally, the metropolitan institute is referred to as *TAFE Metro* within this paper.

Permission to distribute the survey was requested from the directors of both faculties. An email explaining the purpose of the survey, how the results would be used, contact information and confidentiality details, plus a link to the survey was sent to all staff.

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Participants were given 14 days to return the survey. A reminder email was sent one week after the original email and a thank you email was sent one week after the closing date.

It is acknowledged that the survey sample size is small; however, this research was designed as a preliminary investigation which sought to identify the current level of understanding by TAFE Metro teachers of the concept of scholarly practice, and to collect suggestions for organisational enablers to support its establishment in a TAFE environment. The methodological framework used to collect and analyse the data follows Dr Ken Beatty's paradigm 2 (Beatty, 2010), which is based on Grotjahn's research paradigms and is non-experimental, qualitative and interpretive.

4. Results and Discussion

One hundred and fifteen respondents completed the survey which equates to a 9.6% response rate. Table 1 below provides number of respondents from each category:

Table 1: Number of respondents from each category of teacher

Category of teacher	Number
Full-time teachers	61
Part-time teachers	44
Institute managers	7
Other	3

The non-response rate ranged from 7.8% on question five to 23.5% on question nine. Of significance, however, is the non-response rate for questions eight (12.2%) and nine (23.5%), which required free-text input from respondents. Although the intent of these questions was to give participants the opportunity to provide their thoughts and suggestions on aspects specifically related to the research question, the lack of responses is not considered to significantly affect the survey results.

4.1 *On adding degrees to TAFE's programs*

Of all teachers surveyed, 73 of the 115 respondents said that it would enhance its educational offerings. This is in line with research in the UK by Young (2002) where she found that "staff were universally positive about their work on the degree programme" (p. 276). Not surprisingly, 27 respondents believe that offering degrees by TAFE Metro institute could negatively affect the value of its vocational training. This aligns with research by Wheelahan et al. (2009) who found that although many agreed that the market played a large part in the decision to offer degrees, a variety of considerations contributed to the decision whether TAFE institutes should offer them. Many saw it as an opportunity to grow its business, whilst others argued that TAFE higher education provided students with applied programs that were underpinned with the theory as a result of TAFE teachers' industry experience.

4.2 *The meaning of "scholarly practice"*

Keeping up-to-date in both discipline and in teaching skills was selected as the descriptor of "scholarly practice" in teaching and learning by 85 out of 111 respondents. This result is similarly reflected in surveys by Healey (2003) in UK workshops entitled "Embedding the scholarship of teaching into the practice of developers and higher education institutions" where 92% of participants agreed with a definition of scholarship of teaching based on the inclusion of both discipline and pedagogical knowledge.

Twenty-one respondents indicated that maintaining currency in their discipline area was more important than in their pedagogical skills. The majority of these respondents were full-time teachers who have taught in TAFE for over 20 years. One likely explanation for this result is the traditionally strong link with industry, and the expectation of TAFE teachers to keep abreast of industry trends.

4.3 *Differences between teaching on higher education and VET*

Fifty-six percent of respondents believed that higher education teachers are required to do more research, and that theory is more important than practice in teaching higher education students. Generally, vocational teaching was described as skills based with a focus on gaining a job whereas teaching at higher education level was perceived as

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more academic and theoretical, and may or may not be career-focused. Several respondents argued that teaching at both levels requires the delivery of theory and its application. Some respondents said that higher education students were required to have the ability to undertake independent research and critical analysis which results in learning, in contrast to vocational students who require more practice until competency is achieved.

Wheelahen et al. (2009) also found that many TAFE teachers perceive that university degree programs are more theoretical and that university staff are required to do more research than teaching. Young (2002) states that teachers in the UK perceived that further education teachers were involved in “interpretation and modification” rather than their counterparts in higher education who primarily focused on “originating and researching” (p. 276).

4.4 Differences in scholarly practice of higher education and VET teachers

Although most respondents believed there is a difference between the scholarly practice of vocational and higher education teachers, similarities are cited across both areas. These include the need to be aware of current trends, or research, in one’s discipline and use discipline-appropriate pedagogy to enhance students’ learning. Some respondents did not believe there was any evidence of scholarly practice by vocational teachers, whilst others believed there should be no difference between the two because good teachers will apply the same rigour in practice regardless of the student cohort.

A number of respondents believe teachers in higher education had to be actively involved in research which is published, as well as have an awareness of other academic areas, as evidence of scholarly practice. A recurring theme was that the scholarly practice of vocational teachers relates to engagement with industry, and for higher education teachers it is with the theory of the discipline.

4.5 Suggestions to support scholarly practice

Many of the suggestions nominated by respondents reflect an understanding of what scholarly activities are traditionally considered appropriate. Research, publication, peer-review and conference presentations are all mentioned, not only in relation to

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disciplines but also to pedagogy. One respondent suggested that research should not be limited to one's own discipline, but across multiple discipline areas because "interesting things happen on the edge of disciplines where overlap exists".

Provision of more professional development activities and more opportunities to attend external activities were raised multiple times. Several respondents recommended the need for higher-level entry qualifications for teachers regardless of whether they teach higher education or vocational classes.

Increasing casualisation in teaching was strongly criticised as doing a great disservice to the profession, and respondents believe it would not enable a sustainable culture of scholarly practice. Part-time teachers, who comprised 38.3% of respondents, were vocal about the lack of support in their role. Their need to have multiple jobs to earn a living means they do not have the time to invest in scholarly activities as much as they would like (Junor, 2004). Lack of appreciation of what happens in the classroom by managers beyond head teacher-level was also strongly criticised. Although generally, there is support for TAFE Metro's decision to offer degrees, there is an expectation that vocational programs will not be jeopardised. In fact, one optimistic respondent describes the decision to offer degrees as an opportunity for "research within practice (being a combination of both VET and HE) is an excellent goal".

5. Conclusion and recommendations

Despite the lack of an agreed definition of the term *scholarly practice* across mixed-sector institutions, the results have shown that TAFE Metro teachers demonstrate a good understanding both in relation to discipline and to pedagogy, which is in line with the literature. However, there is a tendency for teachers with more years of experience to focus on the development of their discipline knowledge, rather than their pedagogical skills. This reflects the historical expectation of applicants to have high level knowledge of, and experience in, the industry as a prerequisite for employment as a TAFE teacher.

The research also found that the majority of respondents believe that a good teacher will do the necessary research and deliver theory and practice to maximise students'

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learning outcomes regardless of the cohort. This strength is further demonstrated by the current conscientious involvement in the higher education program. However, it is unfortunate that systemic structures and issues do not support a culture of scholarly practice despite teachers' best intentions.

Although TAFE NSW documents how the organisation will support teachers, its implementation is crucial for successful higher education provision. This will have multiple benefits across the organisation since higher education teachers are also VET teachers, and it is unlikely that a reflective teacher would not apply lessons learned in both classrooms. For this to succeed, however, research findings and their application need to be shared amongst colleagues from both sectors in existing workplace forums, both within and across faculties.

Survey participants generally have a positive attitude to the introduction of degrees and have demonstrated a sound understanding of scholarly practice. However, continued growth in the higher education program requires ongoing organisational commitment to ensure that teachers feel sufficiently empowered and supported to take action.

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