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AUTHOR Harreveld, Bobby; And Others  
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## ABSTRACT

Several recent developments represent attempts to remove at least some of the barriers between the teacher education and vocational education sectors of Australian tertiary education. A specific site where this trend is apparent is fieldwork experiences, which are partly intended to broaden students' understandings of professional knowledge and practice by means of placing teacher education students in workplace training sites, colleges/institutes of technical and further education, and private providers of post-compulsory vocational education and training. A closer examination of practice and the overt and covert policies and politics in these fields of work is advocated. This paper reconceptualizes these more integrated fieldwork experiences as a struggle for meaning and purpose, in which rhetoric and tokenism are juxtaposed with well intentioned efforts to empower participants. Specific recommendations are elaborated on for making this empowerment more rather than less likely. The political, practice, and policy issues involved in this kind of fieldwork have wider implications for future relations between teacher education and vocational education in Australia. (Author/LL)

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*Politics, Practice, and Policy in Linking  
Teacher Education and Vocational Education  
Through Fieldwork Experiences*

Bobby Harreveld

Patricia Moran

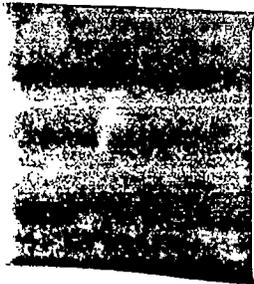
Patrick Danaher

Faculty of Education  
Central Queensland University  
Rockhampton 4702

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## Abstract

Several recent developments represent attempts to remove at least some of the barriers between the teacher education and vocational education sectors of Australian tertiary education. A specific site where this trend is apparent is fieldwork experiences, which are partly intended to broaden students' understandings of professional knowledge and practice by means of placing teacher education students in workplace training sites, colleges/institutes of technical and further education, and private providers of post-compulsory vocational education and training. A closer examination of practice and the overt and covert policies and politics in these fields of work is advocated.

The authors of this paper reconceptualise these more integrated fieldwork experiences as a struggle for meaning and purpose, in which rhetoric and tokenism are juxtaposed with well intentioned efforts to empower participants. Specific recommendations are elaborated for making this empowerment more rather than less likely. The political, practice, and policy issues involved in this kind of fieldwork have wider implications for future relations between teacher education and vocational education in Australia.

# *Politics, Practice, and Policy in Linking Teacher Education and Vocational Education Through Fieldwork Experiences<sup>1</sup>*

## **Introduction**

According to Mark Legg, Director of the Information Services Division at Flinders University of South Australia:

In Australia we may see a significant drop in our number of mature age students who do not require the social aspects of physical presence at the educational institution and who prefer to work at their own pace and at a time which is convenient to them...There is a clear trend in TAFE, with the support of DEET, for *outsourcing* of coursework and accreditation of suppliers of educational products and services. I predict that this activity will increase over the next five years and that this, too, may become a threat to our market. (1993, p. 91)

At first glance, Legg's comment flies in the face of recent rhetoric about increased opportunities for 'open learning' in Australian higher education. According to this rhetoric, the advent of the national unified system in Australian tertiary education heralded current moves to break down structural boundaries that have hitherto marked the 'irreconcilable differences' among the senior secondary school, technical and vocational, and university sectors of the Australian education system. In this scenario, the demise of colleges of advanced education, the growing impetus of competency based training (CBT), and more systematic applications of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) are contemporaneous (although not necessarily complementary) developments in post-compulsory education in Australia.

Yet there is evidence that these trends reflect, not so much the dawning of a 'golden age' in

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<sup>1</sup>The writers are grateful for the willing assistance of the student whose fieldwork experiences constitute the empirical data reported in this paper. Financial assistance in attending this conference from the Faculty of Education at Central Queensland University is also acknowledged. The writers accept responsibility for the views expressed in the paper.

Australian higher education, as the operation of powerful and competing forces at a national political, socio-economic, and educational policy level. According to this view, higher education institutions have a vested interest in maintaining and even increasing the boundaries that separate them, for political and economic reasons rather than considerations of education. For the authors of this paper, the opposing pressures can be encapsulated in the simultaneous moves to extend opportunities for increased access to formal education on the one hand, and to make the provision of public education much more efficient and cost effective (including opening up tertiary education sectors to competition for students) on the other hand.

As is often the case, these tensions and contradictions involving politics, economics, and education are particularly evident at the margins or boundaries among the various education sectors. This paper is concerned with one particular 'boundary site', fieldwork experiences, whereby teacher education students conduct their practicums in workplace training sites, colleges/institutes of technical and further education, and private providers of post-compulsory vocational education and training. From one perspective, this innovation can be empowering to students and instructive to participating institutions. From another perspective, energies can all too readily be dissipated in the struggle for dominant positions among individual universities and colleges/institutes of TAFE and between the university and TAFE sectors.

These assertions are illustrated by detailed consideration of the fieldwork experiences of a single student, who was enrolled in the Bachelor of Teaching degree at Central Queensland University and whose practicum was carried out in an Adult Learning Centre across a variety of course for students at the Rockhampton College of TAFE. The paper is divided into the following sections:

- a description of the student's fieldwork experiences
- an analysis of the implications of the student's fieldwork experiences for teaching adult learners
- an analysis of the implications of the student's fieldwork experiences for assessment procedures
- an identification of the political, practice, and policy issues underpinning future relations between teacher education and vocational education in Australia.

It will become clear that the student's experiences were by no means unproblematic or existing in a vacuum, but rather constituted a microcosm of wider agendas and competing interests that came into play. The wonder is, not that difficulties of organisation and communication were revealed, but rather that the student's experiences were so productive and satisfying for her.

## The Student's Fieldwork Experiences

The student's fieldwork experiences on which this paper is based took place in 1991, the final year of the student's Bachelor of Teaching course at the then University College of Central Queensland (UCCQ) (now Central Queensland University). The student, whose first name is Ruth and who is now teaching in a Queensland government primary school, was contacted by telephone in March 1994 by one of the authors, with whom the student had a long conversation about her reflections on her final year fieldwork experiences. Unsolicited by the interviewer, the student followed up the telephone contact by sending an extended written statement of those reflections, and permission to use them in any way that might benefit current and future students.

Figure One represents Ruth's fieldwork experiences in 1991, the final year of her initial teacher education program.

SEM-ES-TER	INSTITUTION	SUBJECT/ACTIVITY	DESCRIPTION
One	UCCQ	Individual Fieldwork	Observation of adult learning and teaching techniques; participated only with small groups and individual students
One	Rockhampton TAFE	Volunteer Tutor Training	Working individually with adults; enabled a grounding in adult learning
One	Rockhampton TAFE	Working with Mathematics Course	As a student became an equal; tried to observe and gain greater understanding of adult teaching and learning strategies, and to experience what students experience
Two	UCCQ	Teacher Development VI - Action Research	Looked at appropriate rapport with adult students with intellectual disabilities
Two	UCCQ	Children with Special Needs	Further work with adult students with intellectual disabilities
Two	Rockhampton TAFE	Extra-curricular Activities	End-semester dinners and graduation ceremonies; tutored for and filmed a pilot study documenting the provision of adult literacy/numeracy programs for adults with intellectual disabilities
Two	UCCQ	Fieldwork VI	Completed at Adult Learning Centre, Rockhampton

**Figure One: Ruth's Fieldwork Experiences in 1991**

Ruth expressed her determination to add to her job prospects outside of direct primary teaching, while still using her teaching qualification. She felt that, by gaining experience and confidence in adult education, she could increase her chances of:

- enhanced job prospects and work experience
- TAFE continuing to allow her to work with them
- obtaining references for her *curriculum vitae* that would set her apart from other students.

With regard to her various fieldwork experiences in the final year of her Bachelor of Teaching course, Ruth commented:

If you are wanting to encourage others to broaden their teaching prospects then perhaps they need to be encouraged to channel as many [university] subjects as possible into the chosen area. For me fieldwork was the culmination of many months of work. It would not have been effective without the preceding subjects - and probably TAFE would not have been interested in having a fieldwork student they knew nothing about.

When asked about the wider utility of her university subjects, Ruth responded:

Most [university] subjects were useful - particularly those involving strategy & method...when you understand, for example, how children learn to read - you must then present this in "the adult formula". This should not present a problem if we view ourselves as "teachers" and not just "primary teachers". Unfortunately many "primary school teachers" cannot believe in this broader sense of teaching.

Further discussion led to suggestions for possible improvements to the fieldwork - with communication between the university and the TAFE college the major area of concern. Ruth had five teachers assessing her, with each one interpreting the assessment form differently. In Ruth's view, the university needed to have offered greater guidance here. She found that one teacher wished to mark her so harshly that any job would have been difficult to gain. Luckily for her, the other teachers disagreed and finally a marking scheme was worked out among the teachers, with a consensus view being reached. (Ruth received a favourable report in the end.)

Overall, Ruth viewed the fieldwork experiences as interesting and an excellent learning situation. She felt able to recommend the placement to other students.

## Implications for Teaching Adult Learners

From the previous description of the student's fieldwork experiences, we have learnt a number of things about Ruth as an adult learner. This section of the paper will list her characteristics as a learner, and will then consider the implications of these characteristics for other adult learners participating - or thinking of participating - in fieldwork in a 'boundary site'. The discussion is arranged in terms of practice, politics, and policy.

### Practice

Ruth was able to articulate clearly her longer term goal in participating in her various fieldwork experiences: she wanted to obtain a teaching position upon her graduation from university. Her immediate need then became that of making herself as desirable as possible to as wide a range of potential employers as possible. Having identified this need, she decided that it was important to be different, to 'stand out from the crowd' of other applicants for teaching jobs. To achieve this end, she planned a strategy for building up a field-of-experience that would make her as exceptional, even exemplary, to potential employers. She then engaged in behaviour that she was confident would help her to attain her long term goal.

It can be seen that Ruth owned this learning process. She designed it, implemented it, and, via her input into the writing of this paper, evaluated it. In her written response to us, it is evident that at all times she took responsibility for her own learning. Ruth immersed herself in both the content and the context of her learning, as evidenced by her visits to the TAFE college teachers and the extra classes that she attended. She made a conscious effort to acculturate herself into the lives of students and teachers in that section of the TAFE college's operations.

As a learner, Ruth had already received feedback suggesting that her university lecturers considered her academically competent. In their discussion of concepts related to theories of motivation and particularly to students' motivation in learning, Cole and Chan believe this perceived competence to be "influenced by students' own perceptions of how their capabilities are judged by others and is closely related to actual levels of performance" (1994, p. 349). Ruth judged the likelihood of success in her self chosen task to be high. She was willing to apply herself and accept the challenges presented by the attainment of her goal. She was curious about this (for her) previously unknown field of work.

## Politics

What was the political culture of the field of work that Ruth chose for herself for most of her third and final year as a student teacher? In their report to the Commonwealth, the members of the committee to review Australian studies in tertiary education argued that "all students ought to have available to them learning which is grounded in Australian experience and which develops an understanding of Australian environments, both physical and human" (Daniels, Bennett, & McQueen, 1987, pp. 107-108). The extent to which Ruth came to understand the physical and human environments of a college of technical and further education in Queensland in 1991 is difficult to determine. If one relies on data currently available, the answer would have to be that Ruth had a minimal working knowledge and understanding of the issues impacting on the section in which she worked, the college itself, and the system of which it was a part.

At a State level, Adult Literacy/Numeracy was being accepted as a discipline area in the field of study newly termed Access and Foundation Education Studies. 1991 was a year in which many of the initiatives of the International Year of Literacy (1990) were in their infancy. The TAFE system in Queensland had been particularly proactive in its endeavours to document 'best practice' and challenge the boundaries of adult literacy/numeracy provision. Also at State level, the Adult Literacy Information Service was being set up to distribute funds for literacy and numeracy programs and provide an information service for colleges and community providers of Adult Literacy/Numeracy programs. At both a college and a State level, the influences of the new Queensland TAFE Teachers' Award were just being realised from its inception in March 1991. The changes to teachers' work practices being engendered by this political act were coupled with ongoing organisational restructuring within the TAFE sector and the State Department of Employment, Vocational Education, Training, and Industrial Relations (DEVETIR), of which it was soon to become a part. The effects of these changes were to be evident in all areas of operations of the college (and the Department), from curriculum development and delivery to financial planning and resourcing. On the national scene, it was not yet possible to predict the *precise* nature of the micro-economic reforms to work practices and training considered so necessary for Australia's economic survival. It was possible to engage in critical inquiry of the politics that spawned emergent policies of the day. An understanding of these events at college, State, and national levels would seem imperative for any informed ownership of knowledge and the process of acquiring that knowledge.

This discussion has shown that Ruth did indeed have a large degree of autonomy in and responsibility for her learning, and thus considerable control over that learning. However, her restricted knowledge and understanding of the multifaceted nature of the political content and context of her learning has reduced the scale of, if not precluded, her critical inquiry of this particular 'boundary site'. As argued by Grundy, the process of gaining control of knowledge and action can be perceived to be a form of critical pedagogy in which, if this control is actually to be exercised, "this knowledge must be engaged at three levels: it must be owned, understood, and critiqued" (1987, p. 29). Facilitating the understanding and critique of a third year student teacher's knowledge is most likely to be identified as the responsibility of her university lecturers, presumably in association with her TAFE college supervisors.

### Policy

Ruth acknowledges the time and support extended to her by her key supervising teacher at the TAFE college. She is lavish in her praise of not only this teacher but also the other teachers from the section in which she worked. It must be noted, however, that these teachers were not operating within a written college policy document relating to the supervision of student teachers. Her supervising teacher did not participate in any training or induction programs in supervisory processes, policies, or procedures. We understand policy to be not just a document, but processes and contextualised social actions which result in variable outcomes. These outcomes, or "policy effects" as Ball calls them, are both general and specific, resulting in "first order" effects characterised by "changes in practice or structure (which are evident in particular sites and across the system as a whole)" (1993, p. 16). Ball perceives the impact of these changes on patterns of social access, opportunity, and social justice to be policy effects of a second order. Within each boundary site, the relationship between the general effects of policies and the specific changes and responses as evidenced by practice is focused on the *centre*, the *pivot*, the *generator* in which potential tensions and contradictions can be addressed. If such fieldwork experiences are to continue, whether at TAFE colleges or with 'private providers' of training, it is necessary to develop policies relevant to each site, thereby enabling both teachers/trainers and student teachers/trainees to engage in the construction of professionally embedded knowledge.

There was no single person within the university faculty who had an overall responsibility for Ruth's activities at the TAFE college. It was not until the preparation of this paper that a composite picture of Ruth's *actual* fieldwork experiences emerged. Ruth herself was unaware

of the ideological meanings inherent in the practices in which she participated and which she observed. The provision of policies within the faculty that could guide and support both students' and lecturers' actions has been found to be imperative.

The joint development of policies by *all* parties concerned in each fieldwork placement could be seen to be not only desirable but essential if the adult learner's knowledge is to be owned, understood, and critiqued; and if the learner (student teacher) is truly to attain autonomy in and responsibility for her or his own professional practice.

### **Implications for Assessment Procedures**

If fieldwork experiences such as those in which Ruth participated are considered as 'boundary sites', the assessment procedures occurring within those experiences can be regarded as the confluences of separate currents of thinking about and practising of personnel and program evaluation. From this perspective, what is surprising about Ruth's situation is not that there was a dispute about the assessment of her competence, but that this dispute was so easily contained and resolved. The potential for conflicting understandings of professional practice to be revealed in this most public and permanent of processes is considerable.

#### **Practice**

Pragmatically, student teacher assessment forms are often a compromise among several competing views of how prospective teachers should be evaluated - or alternatively the outcome of a practicum committee's bureaucratic deliberations. In both cases, it is likely that the resulting form will be so bland and generalised that it says more about the people who wrote it than the person whose practice is to be reported in it.

Clearly there are many important practical questions to be addressed in the assessment of student teachers in 'non traditional' working environments. One issue is the extent to which the student teacher can reasonably be expected to display familiarity with the specialised knowledge, even the arcane lore, of a Queensland TAFE college. Another matter is whether a supervisor from the TAFE system needs to be aware what the student teacher has received from the university in the way of instruction about adult learning principles. A related item of potential contention is how a criterion such as "Shows rapport with students" is to be interpreted in a situation where the 'etiquette' of relating to people might be considered to be

different in at least some important respects.

A further consideration relevant to the practice of assessment procedures in this 'boundary site' is that, while most attention is focused on the institutional assessment of Ruth, her self assessment of her own practice and her assessment of her students during the practicum appear to reflect a similar combination of influences and ramifications. While limitations of space preclude an elaboration of these issues here, it would be instructive to delineate their similarities to and differences from the factors underpinning the institutional assessment of Ruth's practice as a student teacher of adult learners.

### Politics

Given these practical and pragmatic considerations, it is hardly surprising that we regard as highly significant the political dimension of assessment procedures in this 'boundary site'. Indeed, assessment is inevitably a political activity, because two or more professional practitioners with unequal power are joined in a ritual of examination and judgment. In addition to the ethical aspects of this situation (see for example Coombes, Danaher, & Danaher, 1992), there are questions of ownership and control that need to be answered.

With regard to ownership, the relative inputs into the formative and summative assessment procedures by the student, the TAFE college, and the university clearly have a major influence on the outcomes of those procedures. In particular, the extent to which the various participants believe that they can contribute to making an appropriate and publicly defensible judgment of professional competence will help to determine their level of ownership of the process. An alternative and less productive scenario is one in which either the student teacher feels detached from and only passively involved in the assessment or the nominal assessor perceives her or his role as being to 'rubber stamp' a decision that has already been made through tokenism, 'wheeling and dealing', or some other explicitly political expediency.

With regard to control, it is important to establish who can officially contribute to statements about the student teacher's current and prospective practice as a neophyte TAFE teacher. This includes indicating whether responsibility for the final decision rests with the TAFE college or the university, whether the student teacher is obliged to sign the form, and mechanisms for appeal by the student teacher - the last two in the event of a disagreement with the contents of the form. It extends also to the mechanisms for monitoring the appropriateness and relevance

of the form and any documentation distributed to the participants before and during the period of the practicum.

### Policy

Out of practice and politics comes policy. If 'open learning' - broadly conceived - is really the agenda of mutually supportive fieldwork experiences, it is vital for policies to be developed that will make the assessment of professional performance during those experiences simplified yet responsive to the rapid pace of change in understanding teachers' work - also broadly conceived.

Specific recommendations for policy development are elaborated in the next section of the paper. For the moment, it is helpful to recall Ball's discussion of policy as text and policy as discourse (1993). Drawing particularly on the work of Foucault, Ball asserts his simultaneous location in both these conceptualisations of policy: "textual interventions into practice" (p. 12); and the exercise of power "through a *production* of 'truth' and 'knowledge', as discourses" (p. 14). While Ball's warnings against both 'naive optimism' and 'naive pessimism' are timely, of greater interest here is his emphasis on "the effects or impact of policy", and his insistence that "responses (as one vehicle for effects) vary between contexts" (p. 15). This helps to explain his willingness to disrupt apparently mutually exclusive binaries such as 'policy as text/policy as discourse' (p. 10) and 'constraint/agency' in policy formulation (pp. 13-14). The authors of this paper take heart from Ball's ambivalence: it underscores the instability and complexities of assessing students who are instructed in one sector and assessed in another sector of the tertiary education field.

We also take note of the discussion by Luke and his colleagues (Luke, Nakata, Singh, & Smith, 1993) of "policy as discourse". They approach their account of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy (NATSIEP) from the standpoint that

...of crucial importance [in reading policy texts] are the discursive strategies and moves used to suture over, to hide, to appropriate difference, and those strategies which are deliberately polysemous, which can be read differently as referring to and operating in the interests of competing audiences. (p. 141)

They refer also to a policy text's "namings and syntax for constructing and representing an apparently coherent, nature-like message and agenda" (p. 141), and to policy texts "as public evidence of hegemonic claims open for scrutiny and contestation" (p. 142). From our

perspective, Luke and his colleagues present a useful listing of the elements that can come into play when a text of a different kind - a student's assessment report - is being written.

Of course, it might be objected that these kinds of ambiguities in assessment have always existed when student teachers from a university setting have been judged on their competent practice in either primary or secondary schools. We would respond to this hypothetical challenge by saying that this is precisely our point: there are important sociocultural differences in these institutional settings that have traditionally received less explicit attention than they merit. One analytical benefit of studying 'boundary sites' is that they tend to throw into stark relief anomalies that have hitherto lain in shadow.

## Recommendations

An earlier article to which one of the authors of this paper contributed (Danaher, Elliott, & Marland, 1982) referred to teaching practice as "trial and occasional trauma". In the spirit of offering suggestions for making fieldwork experiences such as Ruth's less likely to be traumatic, rather than with the claim of presenting a panacea for all prospective problems, the following 'recommendations' are framed as suggestions for action that derive from the preceding discussion.

- Communication between individuals and agencies needs to be contextualised and made more explicit.
- In particular, the university needs to articulate its policy objectives and procedures to TAFE colleges, private providers, and other participants in fieldwork experiences.
- The university also needs to engage in substantial monitoring and evaluation of the communication processes between it and other institutional stakeholders.
- The existing policies and practices guiding the fieldwork placements of TAFE students need to be interrogated for their possible applicability to the fieldwork experiences under review here.
- Due recognition must be made by the university of the distinctive sociocultural and other features of the situation in which fieldwork is to take place.
- Consideration should be given to making assessment forms - self, formative, and summative - focused on particular work sites (or at least to providing contextualised statements of the interpretations of assessment criteria).

- Within the parameters of competencies, opportunities should be created for active student participation in negotiating the content of assessment forms. This is likely to enhance greater collaboration and collective ownership of the process. (It also recognises that the process of learning is potentially as important as its product.)
- Explicit attention needs to be given to the coverage of reciprocal and other insurance policies pertaining to the placement of students on fieldwork.
- Sufficient resources need to be allocated to appropriate levels of preparatory work 'in the field'. One reason for the success of Ruth's experiences was her 'acculturation' into the situation in which she was going to engage in fieldwork.
- There is also a requirement for systematic reflection on, and debriefing of, fieldwork experiences as 'boundary sites'. As part of celebrating Ruth's success, we need to focus attention on the structural and personal elements of such experiences, to ensure that they are made as meaningful and productive as possible.

## Conclusion

We began this paper by citing Mark Legg's concern that the TAFE sector might threaten the 'market' of Australian universities. Legg followed the statement of that concern with the following claim:

The burning question for those in universities is whether higher education will be able to transform itself in time to provide a viable alternative for our future students. (1993, p. 91)

In a wider sense than that envisaged by Legg, this is indeed 'the burning question' for both Australian higher education and 'our [that is, Australia's] future students'. If the lessons learned from the case study presented here are to be used by a wider audience, and to be the basis of empowered professionals at several levels, higher education will certainly need 'to transform itself', not least by consolidating and expanding meaningful links between teacher education and vocational education by means of reciprocal and joint fieldwork experiences. Our concern is that the political, practice, and policy issues involved in consolidating and expanding these links will be seen by decision makers as 'insurmountable impediments to change' rather than as 'opportunities for making learning more open'.

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