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Foucault's toolkit: resources for 'thinking' work in times of continual change

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This paper was prompted by our interest in two issues associated with Australia's vocational education and training system: recurring declarations for universal access to vocational education and training (albeit in different forms across different epochs) as the right of all Australians and the continual processes of change associated with the sector over the last two decades. As we approach a time of yet more change in vocational education and training, we call for a rethinking of these two characteristics of a training system, as 'problems of the present', situations which in their present form are 'intolerable'. Reflecting a notion of 'thinking' work as personal, political, historical and practical, the paper offers a glimpse of Foucault (1926–1984) as a person. We explain his use of the term discourse as an overarching frame for understanding 'problems of the present'. We review two major aspects of his analytic toolkit: archaeology and genealogy. We close with reflections on the usefulness of these analytic practices as tactics of engagement for researchers interested in historical approaches to vocational education.

Introduction

We have to know the historical conditions which motivate our conceptualization. We need a historical awareness of our present circumstance. (Foucault, 1983b: 209)

[T]o understand properly the Rudd Labor Government's vision for the future, it will help if we understand the past. (Gillard 2009: 2)

The Technical and Further Education (TAFE) system, as Australia's primary public provider of vocational education, was born from concerted struggles to unite two admittedly stereotypical positions around instrumental training for work and a broader approach to education for life. The 1974 *Kangan Report* (ACOTAFE 1974) promoted a distinctive visionary charter for TAFE, the goal being to provide universal access to lifelong education via broad principles of individual self-improvement, job training and the needs of local communities (Ryan 1982). Since the late 1980s, this charter has been subjected to gradual but radical policy change. Shifts here included, but were not confined to adoption of neo-liberal economic fundamentalism – known in Australia as 'economic rationalism' (Pusey 2003: 10) and application of 'market principles' to produce a more skilful and flexible workforce. These shifts had profound effects on vocational provision in TAFE and on educators' work including:

... the establishment of the competitive training market with pressure on providers to compete with each other for tenders; the downward pressure on pay and conditions; the increasingly fragmented and casualised nature of available work; and the bureaucratisation of technical and further education (TAFE) institutes as these form themselves in the model of lean, mean, competitive business enterprises. (Sanguinetti 2000: 233)

Fast forward to 2009 and yet another overhaul of Australia's tertiary system. The Deputy Prime Minister of Australia (Gillard 2009: 5) argues that the vocational system faces new challenges which require new adjustments: "This is not about bolting on new policies to

an already complex system. It is about fundamentally rethinking separate systems and institutions to create better connected learning for millions of individual students". Here we see a new expression of some of the fundamental elements of the visionary charter expressed by Kangan more than three decades ago. This potted snapshot of Australia's vocational system and the epigraphs beginning this paper illustrate only a few of the connections between where we have been, where we are now and where we are going.

As workers in the Australian vocational system prepare for substantial policy change accompanied by a new round of implementation plans (COAG 2008), we argue the need to look anew at "our present circumstance" (Foucault 1983b: 209). According to Foucault, this requires us to resist conventional views of history as the logical and orderly fine-tuning of a problem via successive policy iterations. Rather a 'history of the present' (Foucault 1977: 31) identifies those 'intolerable circumstances' (Gutting 1994: 10) which we face in the present – what we identify in this paper as a mandatory focus on 'training and retraining' (Gillard 2009: 4) combined with incessant logics of policy fine-tuning to produce an efficient and effective pool of workers. We do not suggest we look anew at this problem with a view to establishing the trajectory of universal access to 'training and retraining' and hence to reveal new insights about barriers, completions and efficiency regimes in contemporary times. Rather, the aim of a history of the present is to show that 'our' problem is constituted through particular practices that order, structure and align as they are also contingent upon other discourses never spoken. Undertaking this kind of historical analysis demonstrates that things could be otherwise. We use Foucault's notion of a toolkit (Macey 1993) to explore the 'tactics' available to engage with these notions of history, vocational training and change.

The paper proceeds as follows. We introduce Foucault, precisely because 'thinking' work – the exploration of the limits of/and on

practice, including one's thinking practice (cf. Shore 2004) – is personal, political, historical and practical. In this case Foucault's personal history provides some insights into his theoretical body of work during his short life (1926–1984).¹ We provide an overview of discourse, a term central in situating the paper in the context of negotiations of power and vocational knowledge. We briefly describe two major aspects of Foucault's work, the archaeological and the genealogical, all the while emphasising that Foucault never acknowledged these as distinct stages of a modernist research agenda. We close by revisiting our contemporary 'problem' and considering what Foucault's toolkit might provide for vocational researchers interested in exploring how notions of participation in training and associated systemic change might be understood otherwise.

Introducing Foucault

For many people who experience marginalisation or discrimination, Foucault's work is not simply theory. While not always easily accessible, his thinking resonates on a very personal level. Here was a man who typified the essential ideals of the Cartesian ego: white, male, European, able-bodied, upper middle-class and a beneficiary of a stellar education, both classical and modern. If he could have ticked the requisite heterosexual box, it is highly debatable whether his subsequent body of work would have generated such productive insights about those deemed marginal in society.

However, Foucault was homosexual and spent much of his life in an intellectual and social environment which viewed homosexuality with all encompassing 'horror' (Macey 1994: 14). As a French

academic of the 1950s and 60s, Foucault, if outed, would have faced immediate dismissal (Macey 1994: 30). Further, a criminal conviction could have brought a custodial sentence in a prison or a psychiatric institution. Religious condemnation remains virtually constant to this day. It is hardly surprising therefore, that Foucault 'never seriously entertained a view of the individual as a bearer of natural rights' (Rabinow 1997: xvi), or that he remained extremely reticent about his personal life. He made occasional commentary about his sexual orientation.

In my personal life, it happened that after the awakening of my sexuality, I felt excluded, not really rejected, but belonging to the shadows of society. All the same, it is a distressing problem when you discover it for yourself. Very quickly, it was transformed into a kind of psychiatric threat: if you are not like everybody else, then you are abnormal, you are sick. (cited in O'Farrell 2005: 20)

However, this was only later in his career when his academic place and stature were secure and the penal code, psychiatric diagnosis and public opinion on homosexuality had begun to shift. Nevertheless, his potential for being othered was a career-long presence in his work of 'writing the history of the present' (Foucault 1977: 31).

We do not intend to eulogise Foucault. Rather, this extremely selective bio-profile establishes two things from the outset. First, Foucault provides an interesting example of scholarship as personal, political, historical *and* practical: 'each of my works is a part of my own biography. For one or another reason I had the occasion to feel and live those things' (Martin 1988: 11). Second, his body of work exemplifies an engaged and in-process approach to thinking work (Shore 2004), dispelling any fabrication of a theory-practice binary. In the next section of this paper we explore two aspects of his intellectual toolkit, arguing that any thinking about universal access to Australian vocational education is always and already enmeshed in labyrinthine understandings of knowledge.

¹ Molly Rowan, one of the authors of this paper, reminds us that a local example of this point is demonstrated by the intersection of influences in Myer Kangan's life, namely, the holistic German vocational education and training influences on Kangan, his personal research projects on Holocaust survivors (cf. Goozee, no date) and his vision of a new universally accessible TAFE in the 1970s.

Foucault's research frame

Early on in his academic career Foucault followed in the footsteps of Nietzsche, amongst others, challenging the definitive claims of universal truth and rationality in Western philosophical thought.² He understood that the constructs used to articulate practice are social and cultural creations, not natural phenomena. He was interested in the 'rules of formation' (Foucault 1972) that constituted what could be known and said about the social world.

Questioning rationality was not simply a matter of revealing alternative truths, for discourses are enmeshed in complex truth, knowledge and power dynamics. Foucault argued that discourses are sets of statements that constitute how the world can be 'known': 'practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak' (Foucault 1972: 49). But everyday meanings are not easily applied here. The word 'speak' is not a reference back to what is actually spoken. Rather, examining discourses reveals 'the emergence of a group of rules proper to discursive practice' (Foucault 1972: 49). Discourses are *taken up* by policy-makers, practitioners and researchers in everyday practice but these discourses are also 'heavily policed [through] cognitive systems which control and delimit both the mode and the means of *representation* systems in a given society' (Gandhi 1998: 77, emphasis in original). Care must be taken not to conflate discursive rules and commonsense notions of grammar. Foucault argues our attention should not be distracted by the 'slender surface of contact, or confrontation, between reality and a language' (Foucault 1972: 48). When deploying a discursive toolkit, a researcher pays attention to the dynamics of *how* what can be said – about productivity, about training, about participation, about progress – is constituted by and through discourses. The tension is evident here

² Our thanks to an anonymous reviewer for reminding us to make the point that Foucault was not alone in questioning the place of rationality in Western thought.

between an agentic subject central to the politics of change and a subject who simply mimics what is ordained in discourse.

One of the very real challenges of engaging Foucauldian research is how to make sense of a body of work by 'a nonhistorical historian' whose approach to writing employs a 'terse, impacted style, which manages to seem imperious and doubt-ridden at the same time, and a method which supports sweeping summary with eccentric detail' (Geertz, cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982/1983: xviii)! Indeed, it is unlikely that Foucault's writing would have met the refereeing criteria for this journal!³ With these issues in mind, we present a snapshot of Foucault's archaeological and genealogical work, a tactic which he most likely would not have approved.

Excavating for 'rules of formation': archaeological analyses

Foucault was ever keen to point out how individuals are always and already enmeshed in discursive practices. The aim of archaeology was not oriented toward 'a theory of the knowing subject, but rather to a theory of discursive practice' (Foucault 1970/1994: xiv). Archaeology then requires one to 'reconstitute the general system of thought whose network... renders an interplay of simultaneous and apparently contradictory opinions possible' (Foucault 1970/1994: 75).

An archaeological analysis involves investigation of 'an archive', 'not to uncover the truth or the origin of a statement but rather to discover the support mechanisms which keep it in place' (Mills 1997: 49). As we have noted above, there is often some slippage between Foucault's

³ Foucault's texts are tricky to read. At particular points he will develop a line of argument with great clarity and then some pages later position himself outside of that logic. One might well argue the benefits of a leaner approach to scholarship; nevertheless the skim read is not a useful way to 'get' Foucault. His are not texts one can dip in and across for key points. Experienced Foucauldians may well see evidence in this paper where we, too, have failed to provide explanations that reflect the *depth* and *discontinuity* across Foucault's sustained body of work.

notion of discourse and commonsense ideas about language. Mills reminds us that 'the archive' is not the examined texts *per se* but refers to the set of rules for what is sayable within an epoch. Rather than an approach that adopts linguistic analysis with the intention of producing meanings, Foucault's work examines the patterns of formation. In *The archaeology of knowledge*,

Foucault is exclusively interested in types of serious speech acts, the regularities exhibited by their relations with other speech acts of the same and other types – which he calls discursive formations – and in the gradual and sometimes sudden but always regular transformations such discursive formations undergo. (Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982/1983: 49)

Paying attention to discursive formations renders visible 'the provenance of the very apparatus within which we think' (Mills 1997: 76). Two issues are particularly relevant here as we explore notions of universal access, training and retraining and the notion of persistent fine-tuning of a vocational system: the rules of formation of scientific discourse and the manner in which a discipline, history, constitutes understandings of truth via notions of succession, progress and continuous development. Foucault's interest in discursive formations was not in the history of an intolerable problem *per se* but in those discourses of development, continuity and progress that create unity, continuity and coherence around how one can understand the problem and trace its emergence.

Foucault (1970/1994: xi) argued that conventional histories did not reveal the '*unconscious of knowledge*', those unspoken, unacknowledged rules that applied across quite different scientific disciplines 'unknown to ... naturalists, economists, and grammarians [who] employed the same rules to define the objects proper to their own study, to form their concepts, to build their theories'. An archaeology aimed to surface the rules in common for forming concepts *and* the rules for forming unity across quite different

disciplinary sites. Here, then, was a practice that worked counter to the strategy of tracing succession, continuity and progress about what could be said.

This resonates with the work of many researchers who talk back to the 'exhaustive ordering of the world' (Foucault 1970/1994: 74) governed by the principles of arithmetic accountability that drive the contemporary social, cultural and economic restructuring of Australian institutions.⁴ An archaeological approach demands detailed critical work at a number of levels to identify the rules of formation of concepts that shape the production of knowledge across quite diverse scientific investigations and epochs. For this paper, it provides a way of understanding how different forms of universal access emerged as a solution to the problem of the present: relentless change and continual fine-tuning of the vocational system which is repeatedly constituted by and through discourses of productivity and welfare reform.

Archaeology also displays respect for differences, 'grasp[ing] them in their specificity' (Foucault 1970/1994: xii). Local criticism is possible, indeed necessary, but also requires one to locate oneself in relation to a form of reasoning (arithmetic accountability, for example) which is only one amongst many. Drawing out these specificities requires archaeologists to pay attention to discourses of change as much as the specificities of change itself. This requires an understanding of the protean and temporal character of discourse at the same time as we remember to remain alert to those practices of coherence that would paint a single story of the emergence of 'training and retraining'.

Despite attention to 'specificity', a common criticism of Foucault's archaeological writing is that it provided few avenues for individuals

⁴ While not archaeologies *per se*, see for example Butler (1999; 2001), Sanguinetti (2000) and Scheeres (2003) who have taken up Foucault's invitation (1980a: 65) to access his toolkit, try out his 'gadgets' *and* make them their own.

to articulate social change. In exploring archaeological possibilities, repressive tendencies of power were more prominent. This period of activity might serve to undercut the relevance of Foucault's work for many vocational researchers if it had remained at this level. We return to this issue in our closing section: What is the work to be done?

Unsettling the present

In reading across Foucault's work, it is apparent that he uses writing 'above all to change himself and not to think the same thing as before' (cited in Stoler 1995: ix). His genealogical work was prompted by reading Emmanuel Kant, his study of Greco-Roman culture and interpretation of the ethos of the Enlightenment. These influences offered possibilities for rewriting history mediated by different understandings of power than those shaping archaeological analyses.

Foucault (1976: 92) maintained that power was not a *thing* to be owned and monopolised. Nor was it 'a group of institutions and mechanisms to ensure the subservience of the citizens of a given state... a mode of subjugation... a general system of domination exerted by one group over another' or other conceptions of power commonly in play. Rather, power is 'the multiplicity of force relations imminent in the sphere in which they operate *and which constitute their own organisation*' (emphasis added).

Genealogy works with the latter 'productive' elements of power not expressed within archaeological analyses to 'emancipate historical knowledges' (Foucault 1980b: 85) from those processes of knowledge production associated with the sciences. However, care is again needed here as discourses of emancipation are accompanied by a multitude of meanings in the fields of community services and adult literacy with which we are associated. In his genealogical work, Foucault argued that conventional scientific knowledge processes suppress, and continue to suppress, *two* kinds of knowing: those

understandings that are 'the products of meticulous, erudite, exact historical knowledge' (Foucault 1980b: 82) yet not recognised by the scientific community and marginalised local knowledges often deemed to be the knowledges of local communities, minorities, indeed even educators. As noted above, some of this thinking was evident in his archaeological work where Foucault demonstrated the force of constitutive rules in shaping what was able to be expressed, recognised and heard as, for example, substantive issues of access in any given epoch.

By drawing attention to these processes of ongoing suppression, Foucault reminds us that *disciplinary knowledge* is itself subject to a series of rules and regulations. He exemplifies this by noting that many 'have questioned whether Marxism [for example] was, or was not, a science' (Foucault 1980b: 84). Of relevance to our argument in this paper, the point is not to determine an answer to this issue, but 'to question ourselves about our aspirations to the kind of power that is presumed to accompany such a science' that denies Marxism a place within scientific knowledge. These erudite knowledges are exemplified by practices that portray paid work and skilled labour to constitute the rules of formation of *scientific* vocational knowledge. Local knowledges manifest in the vocational literature in terminology associated with priority areas and target groups. These categories point to the ways in which socio-economic status, age, gender, race, mobility, region and religion, and a myriad of other classifications, capture the knowledge of those in the 'shadows of society' and with whom Foucault felt such an affinity (O'Farrell 2005).

In our case, a genealogical approach holds promise for its potential to address the problem of the present posed at the beginning of this paper in two ways: analysing the notion of universal access and many of its more recent iterations such as access to training, equity, equality of opportunity, diversity management, user choice, parity of knowledges through recognition of prior learning and so on, and

unsettling the very provenance that constitutes 'the vocational'. For Foucault, this translated as follows:

the political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not to try to liberate the individual from the state, and from the state's institutions, but to liberate us both from the state *and* from this type of individualisation which is linked to the state. (Foucault 1983b: 216, emphasis added)

This is the challenge for both of us as researchers, particularly as it applies to ascendant discourses of clarity, consolidation and streamlining of 'the national' (Gillard 2009) and those subjugated knowledges that belong to the unruly 'local'. This 'liberation' is not simply about disrupting a dominant discourse of effective implementation that has legitimated repeated changes to policy, pedagogy, research management and even conceptualisation of what counts as vocational knowledge. Genealogy aims to build a history of a problem *from the present* but its purpose is not to produce a linear trajectory of 'drivers' linked to remedies. To understand the difference, Foucault's use of the term 'eventalization' is helpful. Eventalization focuses on 'the event' in its historical and situated entirety. Avoiding the 'temptation to invoke a historical constant', it interrupts the pull to self-evident solutions, causes and connections, generating a procedure of 'causal multiplication'. Similar to many qualitative research processes, it encases events in 'a "polyhedron" of intelligibility, the number of whose faces is not given in advance and can never properly be taken as finite' (Foucault 2003: 249). Hence eventalization is not aimed at closure and thus presents a number of challenges for researchers in contexts of highly regulated knowledge production. This kind of 'qualitative research' would attend to 'little things' and 'details' (Foucault 1977) in the context of wider struggles associated with the subjugation of local and erudite knowledges of vocational training noted above. The importance of analyses of power is obvious here. Little things are often so obvious, so mundane, as to

be unremarkable. In one of Foucault's often misunderstood quotes, he argues:

My point is not that everything is bad, but that everything is dangerous, which is not exactly the same as bad. If everything is dangerous, then we always have something to do. So my position leads not to apathy but to a hyper - and pessimistic activism (Foucault 1983a: 231–232).

Foucault was fully cognisant of the obstacles and struggles encountered by people involved in 'genealogical insurrections' (Foucault 1980b). He argued (1976: 95–96) that as every counter power moves within the horizon of the power it intends to overcome, it is likely that with resistance, a fresh counter power is provoked. People experience resistance from those institutions and people with investments in dominant discourses. Insurrections constitute and are constituted by those dominant discourses, hence they are never outside 'the rules which govern the production of utterances in general' (Mills 1997: 76), for example, about universal access. Struggles around the production of utterances necessarily involved not only activities of critical thinking and rigorous self-knowledge, but also interconnection with others, joining forces, sharing concerns and importantly a self-reflexive engagement with one's own complicity in those dominant discourses.

This approach has something in common with the circumstances of many contemporary vocational education and training researchers and practitioners who like us may well have lived in a time when vocational discourse was less driven by efficiency principles. We do not mean to suggest here a return to 'the good old days' of Kangan. Rather, we argue that Foucault's toolkit offers a way of engaging with a new period of policy implementation that reveals both continuities and dissonances with discourses from previous epochs.

Discourses are protean, as are vocational systems, even if they do not always seem so. With Butler (2001: 77), we argue that these conditions present us with 'choices to make and work to do'.

What is the work to be done?

Many readers will recognise and may well support the broad tenets of change demanded of contemporary vocational policy and research. These vary from superficial and incessant fine-tuning of reporting systems to 'fundamentally rethinking separate [tertiary] systems' (Gillard 2009). In this paper we argue that these positions are often premised on caricatures of change that obscure historical struggles about vocational knowledge that Foucault identified at *two levels*: erudite and marginalised knowledges.

Starting with 'big theory' often works counter to the mantras of immediacy and relevance embedded in vocational discourses. Looking elsewhere, for example engaging with a Foucauldian toolkit, involves uncomfortable, difficult reading as we negotiate new disciplinary ways of thinking. Clearly, Foucault's readings challenge the 'keep it simple' mantras associated with vocational education and training.

However, looking to Foucault also runs the risk of capturing the local and situated experience of vocational education and objectifying it beyond recognition. This was one of the oft-mentioned criticisms of Foucault's archaeological work, and it is a recurring theme in the broad field of education when theory is instrumentally *applied* to lives. We argue that Foucault's research can be directed at the local and regional, the strategic and situated, as it also offers opportunities to explore a history of the present; how we arrive at this particular system of education and training at this particular time and with these particular features.

Foucault's work provides a challenging set of analytic resources. He encouraged people to consider his work as a 'toolkit to be used or discarded by anyone and not a catalogue of theoretical ideas implying some conceptual unity' (Macey 1994: xx). In response to critics concerned about the totalising tendencies of archaeological analyses *and* the apparently non-generalisable outcomes of genealogical investigations, Foucault (1980a: 65) argued that he used these 'gadgets' because he was 'involved in certain conflicts'. Thinking work of this kind was a tactical response with the local and the specific in mind. Despite others positioning him as such, he displayed a wilful reluctance to be positioned as the expert knower (Macey 1994). Nevertheless, in employing aspects of his toolkit, researchers can become particular kinds of knowers, actively involved in constituting understandings about systemic change as we also recognise the extent to which we are enmeshed in an archive we cannot name (Foucault 1972: 130). Balancing these tensions requires a good degree of self-belief *and* self-doubt, rigorous introspection *and* historical awareness: it takes time, flexibility, artistry, a strong voice and a willingness to let go of preconceptions. This is hard work, hard thinking work, that also requires an understanding of what Foucauldian analyses *are not*: that is, a toolkit that will reduce the 'fragmentation and complexity across our post-compulsory landscape' (Gillard 2009: 14). If anything, Foucauldian analyses surface the 'little things' that embody this complexity and fragmentation.

We think Foucault's toolkit and the selected analytic resources explored here are helpful in examining the continuities and shifts foreshadowed by recent documents (COAG 2008, Gillard 2009) revealing a new (and not so new) epoch of change in Australian vocational education. Working across these reports and delving into Foucault's toolkit reveals how that engagement is embedded within vocational discourses that are never simply contemporary.

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Dr Sue Shore worked in what was once the Australian further education and training system as a community educator. Since 1988 she has worked as a lecturer and researcher at the University of South Australia. Her interests, professional and personal, are in the paradoxes associated with thinking and doing social justice work and the challenges this work presents for postgraduate studies.

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~~Building capacity through sustainable engagement: lessons for the learning community from the GraniteNet Project~~

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~~This paper reports an exploration into critical success factors for the sustainability of the partnership between the University of Southern Queensland and the Stanthorpe community during the GraniteNet Phoenix Project – the first phase of a three phase participatory action research project conducted during 2007–2008. The concepts of learning community, social capital, university community engagement and partnerships, and co-generative learning through participatory action research and evaluation are brought together to provide a framework for evaluating the sustainability and efficacy of the university-community relationship in the context of the GraniteNet project. Implications of the findings for the ongoing~~