CULTIVATING LEARNERS IN COMPLEX ENVIRONMENTS

JENNIFER K MILES
THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

ABSTRACT

Economic and educational reforms encourage adults to return to study to optimise their contribution to Australia’s place in an increasingly competitive global market. Yet the features of adult learning spaces that are discussed in much of the literature relate to physical structure and architectural design, or to distance and mobility. There is little research on space as it relates to social, intrapersonal and interpersonal connections and the impact these have on vocational learning and new kinds of knowing that emerge. This paper draws on Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory (2000) and Nonaka and Konno’s notion of ‘Ba’ (1998) to explicate the contexts that founded a qualitative doctoral research project that uses narrative methodologies to understand the lived experience, learning and identity work of six vocational practitioners undertaking a diploma teaching program in vocational education and training. This paper reports on preliminary research findings from an inquiry that invites participants to consider the conditions of learning spaces that have been catalysts to personal change, fostering transformed perspectives about themselves as learners and about learning more broadly. I argue that cultivating spaces where teachers can reflect individually and collectively on the learning of their lives provides a platform on which a shared understanding of learning and teaching can be critiqued, reimagined and practiced.

KEYWORDS: LEARNING SPACES, ADULT LEARNING, IDENTITY, KNOWLEDGE CREATION, STORYTELLING, CHANGE, TRANSFORMED PERSPECTIVES, CRITICAL PEDAGOGY.

Jennifer K Miles is a Teaching Associate and Doctoral candidate in the Faculty of Education at Monash University. Her work as an educator and researcher in the spaces of teacher professional development focuses on identity work as the primary foundation for cultivating learner capability. Jennifer works with teaching practitioners across a broad range of professional development programs including universities, TAFE, Adult Community Education, private and not-for profit sectors and contributed to an International Boys School Coalition (IBSC) research project exploring masterful teaching practices in the education of boys. Her current PhD research examines the lived experience of vocational practitioners as they engage with spaces where they can unpack their own transformative stories of learning. Jennifer is an active member of the international Transformative Learning community.
THE HISTORICAL LANDSCAPES OF VET

The landscapes of Australian Vocational Education and Training (VET) have emerged from centuries of British and European political, economic and sociocultural influence, enduring civil unrest, world wars and global crises (Armytage, 1956, 1957a, 1957b; Brown, Rushbrook, Ferrier, & Selby Smith, 1995; Lloyd, 1953; Musgrove, 1966; Rushbrook & Brown, 2001; Ward, 1973). As the debate around the place, purpose and methods of providing relevant technical and vocational education and training has continued to ebb and flow against the backdrop of an increasingly competitive global market, consecutive Councils of Australian Governments (COAG) have implemented economic and educational reforms to promote Australia’s standing on the world’s economic stage, offering incentives to individuals and industry to engage in further education and technical skills training (Bowman & McKenna, 2016; Brown, 2015; COAG, 2016; Forward, 2013; VTA, 2013).

I am a teacher educator of vocational practitioners who are ‘on the ground’ in the vocational education and training sector. Having already contributed richly to our nation’s economic prosperity through engagement in their own industries, they come to me as students, however they are skilled professionals and business owners who have made a decision to share their extensive skills and knowledge with the younger, emerging workforce who enrol into courses to learn their chosen trade or profession.

I am also a student myself - a PhD candidate researching the experiences of these vocational practitioners as they navigate the often disorienting landscapes of VET through the lens of their own emerging identity as educators. This paper explicates the contexts that founded the qualitative project and reports on the progression and early findings of this inquiry. The narrative study invites participants to consider the conditions of learning spaces that have been catalysts to personal change, fostering transformed perspectives about themselves as learners and about learning more broadly, so that they might engage more authentically and effectively with their teaching practice. Examples are provided that highlight the benefits of cultivating spaces where teachers can reflect individually and collectively on the learning of their lives, and build a foundation on which a shared understanding of learning and teaching can be critiqued, reimagined and practiced. I conclude with reflections on the inquiry as it unfolds its knowing.

TENSIONS WITHIN VET

Within the context of the global economic firestorms of recent years, and as variously elected state and federal governments wrestle for control, policymakers in vocational education attempt to balance the needs of industry and Australia as an economic force with the ideal of a socially just and egalitarian society (Brown, 2004; McGrath, 2012). It is well acknowledged within the sector that the pedagogy of VET is industry focused, competency-based training (CBT) and assessment (Billett, 2011; Forward, 2013; Government, 2016; Rushbrook, 1995; VTA, 2010), and many researchers critique its industrialised, instrumental approach to learning (Adams et al., 2014; Freire & Shor, 1987; Robinson & Aronica, 2015).

Although based on a constructivist paradigm, according to Wheelahan (2009), instrumentalism ‘plunders’ constructivism, undermining critical thinking and knowledge acquisition about the self and the focus of learning. Furthermore, "knowledge must be placed at the centre of curriculum, and ... because CBT does not do this, it excludes working class students from access to powerful knowledge” Wheelahan (2009), p227.

There are many who fight to have the voice and contribution of these learners and workers included, none more so than Freire (1972), a celebrated critique of ‘banking’ education. Freire vehemently opposed educational policy and practice that trains people only to the extent required of them to perform their job. Many critical pedagogues echo his critique of this industrialised approach to education that advances the reproduction of existing ideologies (Forward, 2013; Robinson & Aronica, 2015).
SPACES OF LEARNING - REPRODUCTION OR TRANSFORMATION?

Reproduction is a notion discussed in various guises by many critical pedagogues (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Brookfield, 2005; Carr, & Pruyn, 2012; McLaren & Kincheloe, 2007; Shor & Freire, 1986). My doctoral research explores the conditions that differentiate spaces of reproduction from spaces of transformation, and attempts to understand how spaces are reproduced or transformed. That is, the differences between learning spaces designed to perpetuate the status quo, and learning spaces whose design is cultivated to transform learners’ and teachers’ knowing.

Given the nature of VET as deeply grounded in industry, it is prudent to draw on one of industry’s giants for insight into ways of conceiving how space informs knowledge creation within this context. ‘Known worldwide as the guru of Knowledge-based Management’ (University, 2016), Ikujiro Nonaka is a Professor Emeritus at Hitotsubashi University, Japan, and has been described as one of the foremost business thinkers (Witzel & Warner, 2013).

In optimising knowledge creation, Nonaka (1998) draws on a Japanese concept known as ‘Ba’ that translates roughly into the English word ‘place’, referring to it as a shared space for emerging relationships. Space can be physical, virtual, mental, or any combination of the three, and is “conceived as the frame, made up of the borders of space and time, in which knowledge is activated as a resource for creation.” (p. 41). Nonaka relates this to the organisation honouring the worker on the ground, and the tacit knowledge they hold - creating spaces where Ba can flourish to allow individual and/or collective knowledge to be shared and enhanced by newly emerging, collaborative perspectives. Ba is a rich space that acknowledges the individual as key to the organisation’s success, and where the individual realises himself as part of the environment on which his life depends. Nonaka defines Ba as a concept and a context that harbours and grows meaning and potential, differentiated from ordinary human interaction because of the concept of knowledge creation. Ba is a space of cultivating, recycling and reordering of knowledge resources to enable the re-formation and emergence of new knowing (Nonaka & Konno, 1998).

Nonaka’s application of Ba provides a clear example of how inclusion of honouring spaces within our industry-driven VET sector might promote learning and knowledge about self that can be cultivated in a way that contributes to the success of the whole, and to the knowledge creation process.

HEARING THOSE ON THE GROUND

I would argue … that a critical and affirming pedagogy has to be constructed around the stories that people tell, the ways in which students and teachers author meaning, and the possibilities that underlie the experiences that shape their voices. It is around the concept of voice that a theory of both teaching and learning can take place, one that points to new forms of social relations and to new challenging ways of confronting everyday life.

Peter McLaren (2007, p51)

Typically, vocational teachers come to VET after an extended time in industry and hold tertiary qualifications ranging from post-graduate degrees to industry trade credentials (Miles & Court, 2013). To enter teaching in VET, they undertake the minimum qualification for vocational teachers - Certificate IV in Training and Assessment - and to achieve career progression beyond this, they are subsequently required to undertake a Diploma level qualification in vocational education and training, with a teaching practicum.

Over many years of facilitating these professional development programs, anecdotal evidence has identified a number of authorising conditions commonly reported across these diploma learning
spaces. Many reports relate to the benefits of social learning and the development of small communities of practice that support the successful navigation of the individual and the collective through often disorienting learning programs (Miles & Court, 2013). Overwhelmingly, the conditions reported that cultivate success for these adult learners relate to social, intrapersonal and interpersonal connections and the impact these have on learning and the new kinds of personal and vocational knowing that arise.

**RESEARCH METHODS**

Against this background, my research emerges. It employs narrative methodologies to draw out the phenomenological lived experience, learning and identity work amongst experienced vocational practitioners who returned to study in a post-compulsory VET teaching diploma program. Participants were recruited via a short questionnaire distributed through social media, to gather demographic information and to identify an indication of any significant perspective transformation experienced while undertaking the VET teaching diploma. Those who had no such experience were excluded, as the focus of the inquiry was to identify catalysts to change – conditions that promoted new ways of seeing themselves as critical learners and teachers. Additional data was collected from participants through in-depth interviews, focus groups and final reflective interviews.

Participants were initially asked to reflect on the ways in which identity work and the environmental conditions in their diploma learning spaces facilitated critique of identity construction as a learner. They were then encouraged to identify any consequent transformed perspectives on their learning and teaching process and practice. Finally, to share their experiences ‘on the ground’ as they learned and practiced within the fluctuations in opportunity and challenge of the times... how they navigated and negotiated the unrest that is ever present within the changing landscapes of VET.

**STORIES OF TRANSFORMATION**

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 2000) asserts that from a disorienting dilemma in life – an event that throws one off the familiar course of existence and knowing to that point – a process of self-examination emerges that causes the questioning of long held values, behaviours and world views. From this new questioning standpoint, a growing discontent and alienation can emerge from what has been traditionally accepted as social norms and structures. A greater critical awareness of others, both within and outside of the individual’s morphing view of the world ensues, that critiques and transcends previously accepted social roles and expectations, and the habitual ways in which these assumed roles are enacted. Mezirow (2000) frames this process and describes how reinterpretation and reconstruction of meaning attached to past experiences, and awareness that our lived experience and discontent has been shared and acknowledged by others, can support an openness and willingness to construct a new and unique frame of reference.

Storytelling is a tool for helping people to find a place to start on this journey to self – a beginning point where they can extend their understanding of the impact of cultural and environmental influences on their sense of identity. In addition, storytelling provides a space where uncontested assumptions about broader cultural narratives can be unpacked, critiqued and linked into, or rejected. Van Manen (1997) speaks of examining lived experience through a phenomenological lens, not as a way of finding universal truths, but as a means to understanding the experiences, personal truths and meaning-making of our own lives... the storyteller as the human scientist researching and claiming what is meaningful to them.
PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Many participants referred to reflective exercises required throughout the teaching diploma and the powerful impact these exercises had both during and following the course. One participant identified a 'light bulb moment' she experienced after completing a critically reflective essay on her early learning experiences. She described herself as a social girl at school (not always applying herself to her studies), and recalled a particular event - a comment from a teacher in her high school years - that had been a critical point in her development. She had, uncharacteristically, submitted an assignment that she had passionately and diligently applied herself to, and gained a grade of 100%. She was however ridiculed by the teacher, and accused of submitting work that was not her own. After reflecting on this in her VET diploma essay, she discussed her sudden realisation that this incident had impacted her whole life – she recognised that she had spent a lifetime since, working diligently behind the scenes in all her vocational roles, so that her high quality work could never be brought into question. In addition, she recognised that the time was right to step forward in all her power. She expressed that this small but powerful truth was incredibly freeing for her, and allowed her to release old ways of behaving.

Two other participants spoke of validation of things they had known but had not been able to name, and an emerging awareness in the time since the course of new ways of seeing and practicing learning and teaching. They articulated that the safe, social learning spaces that were cultivated during the diploma program resulted in a process of personal unfolding that revealed significant meaning making. Both the participants identified new ways of applying transformed perspectives to supporting learners in their own turbulent journeys. It is my early observation that these responses resonate strongly with Mezirow's process of transformative learning (2000) and with Nonaka's argument for Ba as an emergent foundation for relationships and knowledge creation (Nonaka & Konno, 1998).

As a passionate critical pedagogue, the beginnings of my research focus were on the participant's classroom experience. Specifically, I explored the dynamics between the learners and facilitators of that space, and the physical, social and emotional spaces that lay beyond. What I hadn't consciously considered was that rich learning might come ONLY from spaces external to the site of formal learning. For one of my participants, these external spaces related to the teaching practicum where learning truly came alive for him. As an experienced learner and teacher, his decision to undertake the VET diploma was purely related to career progression. He participated in the formal learning spaces without any conscious perspective transformation, but was highly engaged and changed by the diverse perspectives and approaches he was exposed to during his hours observing others’ classes, and in receiving feedback from his teaching peers.

THE STORY THAT CONTINUES

My research continues and is a story still in the telling. This paper has explored the methodological approach to the study, unpacking the theoretical foundations that have founded the inquiry, and highlighted a few emerging themes of interest. Deeper investigation, analysis and synthesis of the stories told by the participant teachers will reveal much that is yet to be heard and understood.

For those who come to VET to share the learning of their trade, and experience conditions in learning spaces that are transformative, my continuing investigation will seek to provide insight into the ways in which engaging with learning spaces in the VET diploma opened them to new ways of seeing and knowing; how they continue to navigate the complex intersections between the needs of industry, governments and the world of their learners in a system that threatens to treat people and education like a production line (Robinson & Aronica, 2015), and how they experience their power and their voice within...
the context of contradictory perspectives, competing agendas, and the difficult realities of Australian VET. Ultimately, how transformations in perspective have impacted their practice and outcomes for their learners.

The findings of my research will contribute to the growing evidence base that acknowledges the immense value, at an individual and societal level, of a pedagogical approach that fosters and promotes transformative, life-altering learning (Dirkx, 2000; Forward, 2013; Freire, 1972; Garvey Berger, 2004; hooks, 1994; Mezirow, 2000; Miles, 2011; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Wink, 2011). I argue that cultivating spaces where teachers can reflect individually and collectively on their learning provides a platform on which a shared understanding of learning and teaching can be critiqued, reimagined and enacted.

Jennifer Garvey Berger (2004, p1)
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Author/s:
Miles, J

Title:
Cultivating Learners in Complex Environments

Date:
2016

Citation:
Miles, J, Cultivating Learners in Complex Environments, Informing education theory, design and practice through learning environment evaluation, 2016

Persistent Link:
http://hdl.handle.net/11343/191859

File Description:
Published version