

Researching Education and Training

The SOEP Project

Terri Seddon, Lawrence Angus, Peter Rushbrook
Monash University

The SOEP or 'Social Organisation of Educational Practice' project has been funded for three years by the Australian Research Council. Lawrie Angus and I, the chief investigators, have been fortunate in being able to fund Peter Rushbrook's secondment from Boxhill College of TAFE to work with us as part of the research team. My aim in this paper is to outline what the project is about and how we are undertaking the research.

What are we studying?

The name of the project has now become something of a joke but it does give some indication of our research focus. The real world problem which provided the initial trigger for the project was the wide-ranging debates about education and training reform in Australia in the 1980s and 1990s. All these debates seemed to be addressing a fundamental question, how should teaching and learning, and the infrastructure necessary to support teaching and learning, be organised for the 21st century? The primary aim of the SOEP project was to provide a data base which would help those involved in both policy making and face to face relationships in education and training to address this question.

Providing a data base meant that we would need to investigate the special work of the education industry, that is, the work of teaching and learning and the work of establishing and managing the infrastructure for teaching and learning. We captured this complex array of work in the term 'educational practice'. Now the real world question could be turned into questions that were amenable to research.

Our preliminary practical questions for investigation were:

1. How has a nation-state, like Australia, organised its educational practice?
2. How have current economic, political, cultural and social changes, at both local and global levels, affected this pattern of educational provision.

Drawing on other research, we understood 'educational provision' to be an outcome of social processes which select, organise, regulate and distribute culture to individuals who, through this process of cultural transmission, are inducted into life processes, including work. Understanding the pattern of educational provision in Australia depended then, on answers to two more academic questions. The questions were academic in the sense that they building blocks in the

project. They were not obvious at the outset of the project and did not have immediate relevance to the practical work of education and training but, never-the-less, they were fundamental to our work of providing a data base which would inform the debates about education and training reform. The questions were:

3. Why has the society-wide provision of education and training taken the form it has in Australia?
4. What is the scope for continuity and for change in this social organisation of educational practice in the current era?

Now, 18 months into the project we have been able to draw these preliminary issues and questions into a more coherent argument which

provides a sharper focus for our work. This is outlined in the following steps which make up our current project brief.

The SOEP project brief, 1995

Step 1: The starting point:

Recent debates in education have been prolific and wide-ranging. The major emphasis has been on the need to change education for changing times.

The big question underlying these multiple debates concerns the social organisation of educational practice, that is, the way practices of teaching and learning, and the infrastructure necessary to support it, is organised and managed on a society-wide scale. What is at stake in the multiple education debates is the practical prospect for appropriate institutional redesign in Australian education.

Premises of the contemporary debate

This big question rests upon a set of assumptions about education and its significance in contemporary society. These relate to (1) the contribution of education to social life, and (2) the nature and significance of social institutions, like education, in social life.

(1) Education in society: Education has been a key social institution because it has been central to the transmission of culture between generations. The discursive practices of schooling (encompassing all institutionalised sites of educational practice) contribute to and shape economic and cultural production because of the way these discursive practices are selected, organised, distributed and regulated. Control of the social organisation of educational practice therefore shapes new generations, their social and discursive practices and their social effects.

(2) Education as a social institution: Education is understood to have a social shaping effect in individuals' lives because, like other social institutions, the institutionalisation of educational practice

establishes sets of rules within which social action proceeds. The nature of the rules, their origins, the mechanisms through which they have their effect, and the kinds of effects generated are the subject of institutional theory, and much debated. Theories of institutions generate accompanying understandings of continuity and change, and mechanisms of institutional redesign which inform the practical politics of education and the work of creating continuity and change in education.

Step 2: The prospects for continuity and change in education
These understandings which recognise the significance of education in shaping individuals and society makes the social organisation of educational practice contentious because of the way different patterns of institutionalisation promote different social ends. Preferences in terms of social outcomes, together with differing theories of institutional formation and mechanisms of institutional design, therefore underpin the politics of education.

But these politics around social outcomes and the appropriate mechanisms for institutional redesign play out in particular institutional contexts, which already exhibit particular patterns of institutionalised practice, subject formation, social hierarchies and procedures.

The prospects for continuity and change in education are forged, therefore, in the confrontation of practical politics and obdurate social organisation. Assessing the prospects for continuity and change

means assessing this confrontation between:

The way educational practice has been organised, and
The way educational practice might be reorganised for the 21st century, given:
the way the normative politics around the social outcomes of education
and
the practical politics around mechanisms of institutional redesign play out.

Step 3: Framing core research questions

So how is this confrontation playing out in the 1990s? And what is its implications for change and continuity in education?

Step 4: Defining specific research questions

How has educational practice been organised in Australia?

What dynamics for change had it generated?

What outcomes might have been expected on a steady as she goes model?

[Historical context]

How have the discursive politics about the need for educational change

played out?

What is presumed in relation to the normative question about the social outcomes of education?

What is presumed about the appropriate mechanisms for institutional redesign?

How is the 'problem' of education defined?

What is identified as problematic and in need of change?

What are the expected outcomes from this framing of educational change?

[Policy debate and practical politics of education]

What are the actual effects of the press for change?

In education overall?

In terms of sectors?

In terms of sectoral organisations and

In terms of individuals' experience of them?

[Reports of ethnographies]

Are patterns of continuity and change evident?

What outcomes appear to be emerging?

What does this tell us about the nature of social institutions and mechanisms of institutional redesign.?

What are the implications for the prospects of ongoing continuity and change in education?

[Discussion, interesting themes, critiques and conclusions]

How will the study be done

The project will proceed by drawing together a series of investigations of policy, history, and contemporary experience, set within a theoretical framework given by a social theory of education (eg. Williams) and theories of institutions and institutional design (work to be done).

The theoretical framework will justify our approach to the study and the way the questions have been framed so as to emphasise education as a social institution and the distinctiveness of sub-institutions such as schools and TAFE.

The history should give a sense of the dynamic context of educational practice in Australia.

The policy should give a sense of the practical politics of education reform and, in particular, the character of the powerful intervention

for change which has problematised the sectoral boundaries and put issues related to the society-wide provision of education on the agenda.

The ethnography will provided a sense of:

How individuals understand the past

How they have experienced the changes now being driven by government

policy

How they understand the changes now being driven by government policy

How they have responded to these changes in terms of:

their own lives, aspirations, identity, and application of effort

their working life, colleagues, and students

How they see their work setting/institution responding to these changes

What they see as the prospects for the future for themselves, their work, their institutions

Such data will provide a picture of actual change arising directly from policy, or from individuals' reinterpretation of policy and its application in personal/collective work projects. This will give some indication of the actual impact of the economic policy intervention and how it plays out in different sectors and different levels/departments/occupational niches within those sectors. It needs to generate individual patterns which can be a basis for identifying organisational and sectoral patterns.

The data will start to reveal the range of institution-building/changing projects that are underway and what is protected from such projects. This will give a feel for the locuses of change and institutional traditions where continuity is protected. It will also give a sense of the kinds of changes which are set in train and the implications of those changes as new dynamics within old, existing but dynamic, contexts.

The data will provide empirical insights and outcomes which can be juxtaposed against the expected outcomes of the economic policy intervention. This will give a handle on theories of institutions and institutional design, and will allow us to comment on the impact and significance of the government intervention and its normative strategy.

Project methodology

We have planned our research methodology in three phases. In the first phase of the project we are becoming acquainted with the institutional arrangements of schools and TAFE. Our aim is to produce a series of background papers which document the 'facts of the matter' in relation to a number of themes: the history of schools and TAFE, the range of sectors in the current market context, pathways, the nature of teachers and their teaching work, the nature of managers and their managing work, the governance of the education industry, and of schools and TAFE, industrial relations in education and training.

The second phase involves 'illustrative ethnographies'. We are undertaking ethnographic investigations in schools and TAFE involving a range of techniques such as interviews, observations, review of documents. Our aim is not to develop an understanding of the whole schools or TAFE Colleges and how they work. Rather we are focusing our investigations around key questions related to the changing economic, political and social environment in Australia which we see spearheaded,

in education and training, through distinctive policy interventions. In schools it is Schools of the Future; in TAFE it is National Training Reform Agenda. Our questions guiding this phase of the study are: (1) What difference has the policy intervention made? (2) How has the policy intervention played out in the institution? How has it affected

the teaching work? How has it affected the managing work? (3) What do participants (teachers/managers) make of all this? By asking these questions we will get a sense of insiders' views of continuity and change and schools and TAFE. These data will be integrated with the background papers from phase 1 to produce a series of longer papers which juxtapose insiders and outsiders views.

The third phase of the project will build on these longer analyses. We anticipate that, having completed the ethnographic work, a number of puzzling or tantalising issues will emerge as requiring further investigation. These follow-up investigations will help us to clarify our understandings, fill gaps, resolve uncertainties. The outcome of this phase will be the production of chapter drafts for a big book which documents the work and findings of the project.

Outcomes

Real world issues, practical research questions and academic questions are interrelated in the SOEP project. They enable us to develop research outcomes which are both theoretical and practical. The theoretical outcomes will begin to provide answers to questions about ways of understanding. Specifically, we will be in a position to shed light on the nature of education as a social institution and the dynamics of institutional life within education. The practical outcomes will involve drawing together the work of investigating and reconceptualising in the project, and feeding this back into the practice of education and training. Our aim is to synthesise this diverse work in a book.

Currently we are involved in phases 1 and 2 of the project. In practice, the experience is already of drowning in data. The challenge is to keep synthesising the material. We recognise clearly that each researcher can only take a particular slice through the empirical realities and come up with a particular picture, map, interpretation, and set of understandings. The most important task will be to put together these particular interpretations, integrate them sufficiently to produce a provocative account and contextualise the interpretations so that they foreshadow more general issues and questions for further research.