AN APPLICATION OF BASIL BERNSTEIN TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING POLICY IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Elements of the work of Basil Bernstein’s (Bernstein, 1996, 2000) are used in this paper to analyse the national structure and policy of vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. The analysis is part of work towards a Doctor of Education degree at Monash University which aims to investigate the impact of online technology on the teaching practice of teachers employed in Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

The constructs of classification and framing are found to be useful in identifying consistencies and inconsistencies in the ways that the prevailing pedagogic device manifests itself in national structures and policy. The analysis reveals that policy intends to influence the distributive and evaluation rules of VET, that the official pedagogic discourse of VET is dominated by industry, and training for work. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the work reported here is intended to underpin the Doctoral studies.

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents work in progress towards a Doctor of Education degree at Monash University, the doctoral research investigates the impact of the implementation of online technology on the teaching practices of teachers employed in Technical and Further Education (TAFE). Basil Bernstein (1996, 2000) developed a body of work that has been applied to a range of pedagogic issues. These include the analysis of curriculum reform in various contexts (Neves & Morais, 2001; Soloman & Tsatsaroni, 2001; Vitale, 2001), pedagogy and socially differentiated (disadvantaged) learners (Dooley, 2001; Exley, 2001; Ivinson, 2002; Morais & Neves, 2001; Singh, 2001), and the implementation of computers and computer technology (Lamnias & Kamarianos, 2002; Singh, 1992; Tyler, 2001). The current paper will provide an overview of the work of Bernstein and apply elements of that work to the current structure and policy in vocational education and training (VET) in Australia. The paper will then flag how the work reported here will be used as a base from which to explore the impact of online technology on the practices of TAFE teachers.

AN OVERVIEW OF BERNSTEIN’S WORK

Basically the theory addresses forms of symbolic control as regulators of cultural reproduction and of its change. In particular it addresses those forms of symbolic control institutionalised formally or informally as pedagogic practice. (Bernstein, 2000, p.123)

Bernstein’s work has been described as having three phases: the study of language; attention to classification and framing; and, work on pedagogic discourse and educational transmission as pedagogic text (Haavelstud, 2001, p.319). Bernstein’s most recent contribution was in the development of the ideas of horizontal and vertical discourse (Bernstein, 2000, pp.155-174). This brief overview of Bernstein’s work will be limited to the ideas of classification and framing, and the pedagogic device with particular consideration of the recontextualising principle as constructs that may have the potential to identify discourses that are privileged and disadvantaged in VET policy.
Classification and Framing

Haavelstrud (2001, p.319) describes the second phase of Bernstein’s work as the theorisation of classification and framing. These constructs provide a means to analyse how power and control are transmitted as a result of the way that content is classified and the way that interactions are framed. The constructs can be used at two levels: to describe the structural and functional elements of teaching practice; and to examine pedagogic codes thereby providing the opportunity to investigate the nature of the pedagogic discourse and the enabling pedagogic device.

Classification describes the means by which power relations are transformed into specialised discourses (Bernstein, 1996, p.3). From this perspective, power relations create, legitimise and reproduce boundaries between different categories of groups (e.g. gender, class, race), discourses and agents such that power always operates to produce dislocations (Bernstein, 1996, p.19). Therefore, classification refers to a defining attribute between categories, rather than to a defining characteristic of the category itself (Bernstein, 1996, p.101). Where classification is strong, there is a high level of insulation between categories, discourses and agents (Bernstein, 1996, p.20).

Framing refers to the nature of control over the selection of communication, sequencing, pacing, criteria and the control over the social base which makes this transmission possible (Bernstein, 1996, p.27). Framing is the means whereby the principles of control are transformed into specialised regulations of interactional discursive practices (pedagogic relations) which attempt to relay a given distribution of power (Bernstein, 1996, p.3). Bernstein describes framing as the result of two discourses, the instructional discourse (ID) and the regulative discourse (RD), such that the instructional discourse is always embedded in the regulative discourse (Bernstein, 1996, p.28). Regulative discourse refers to social rules and instructional discourse to discursive rules of pedagogic interactions. In general, where framing is strong there is visible pedagogic practice, the rules of instructional and regulative discourse are explicit, and the transmitter has explicit control over selection, pacing, criteria and the social base. Where framing is weak, pedagogic practice is likely to be invisible and the acquirer has more apparent control, the rules of regulative and instructional discourse are implicit and largely unknown to the acquirer (Bernstein, 1996, pp.27, 28).

Classification and framing can vary independently to generate different modalities of pedagogic practice (Bernstein, 1996, p.102). The collection code is characterised by strong classification and strong framing. Interactions between teachers and students are highly restricted and controlled. The integration code is characterised by weak classification and framing. This code allows for flexibility in mixing categories in a process of teaching/learning marked by a greater influence of the teacher and pupil in classroom interaction (Haavelstrud, 2001, pp.325-326). In the cases of both classification and framing it is possible to distinguish between the strength and weakness of each characteristic from a perspective internal or external to a particular context (Bernstein, 1996, p.101).

Pedagogic Device

Following his work on classification and framing, Bernstein turned his attention from codifying the way in which knowledge is relayed to a consideration of the relay itself (Bernstein, 1996, p.39). Through the pedagogic device, he theorised the selective development of pedagogic discourse.
As a symbolic ruler of consciousness, the pedagogic device provides the intrinsic grammar, (grammar in a metaphorical sense), of pedagogic discourse (Bernstein, 2000, p.28). This grammar is mediated through three interrelated rules. Distributive rules distribute different forms of knowledge to different social groups. Recontextualisation rules construct the ‘thinkable’, official knowledge, and, the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of pedagogic discourse. Evaluation rules construct pedagogic practice by providing the criteria to be transmitted and acquired (Bernstein, 2000, p.114). Variable forms of realisation of the pedagogic device have the capacity to restrict or enhance the legitimacy of potential pedagogic discourses and are not ideologically free. Those who own the device own the means of perpetuating their power through discursive means and establishing, or attempting to establish, their own ideological representations (Bernstein, 1996, p.117).

In education, the recontextualising principle is active at a number of points (Neves & Morais, 2001, pp.225-226). Through the official recontextualising field (ORF) the State operates at a generative level to legitimise official pedagogic discourse, this undergoes further recontextualisation through the pedagogic recontextualising field (PRF) when policy is interpreted and implemented by teachers. The pedagogic discourse is further recontextualised when it is ‘learnt’ by the student.

Two further constructs need to be introduced at this point, recognition and realisation rules. Recognition rules enable the recognition of legitimate text. Realisation rules determine how we put meanings together and how we make them public, these rules are necessary to produce legitimate text (Bernstein, 1996, p.32). Therefore, in order to have access to a pedagogic discourse one must have access to the associated recognition rules, to be able to produce a contextually specific text or practice one must also have access to specific realisation rules.

THE STRUCTURE AND POLICY OF VET IN AUSTRALIA

This section of the paper provides a descriptive and Bernsteinian analysis of current structural and policy characteristics of VET, it is limited to a national perspective.

Current Structure of the National VET System

As a result of the States and Territories not accepting a Commonwealth offer to take full funding responsibility for VET, the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) was established in 1992 (Mitchell, Robertson, & Shorten, 1999, p.110). Under this arrangement, in return for Commonwealth funding, States and Territories retain responsibility for the management and administration of systems in their own jurisdiction, but agree to co-operate with the national agenda.

ANTA delegates operational responsibility to the industry-led ANTA Board which provides advice to ANTAMINCO on VET policy, strategy, priorities, goals and objectives nationally; and annual VET plans that detail how States and Territories propose to meet national priorities, goals and objectives (http://www.anta.gov.au/abtBoard.asp accessed 26 April, 2003). At an operational level the relationship between the States, Territories and Commonwealth is documented in the ANTA Agreement which establishes agreed outcomes for the VET system and requires that all States and Territories comply with ANTA policy. Under the ANTA arrangements, industry is also extended a central role in the development of VET policy through Industry Training Advisory Boards (ITABs). These bodies are composed of industry and union representatives, they provide advice to ANTA on issues related to training needs (Mitchell et al., 1999, p.110). The ITABs are central in the development of competency standards that are aligned to assessment guidelines and qualifications in national Training Packages. These Training Packages are endorsed by the National Training Quality Council (NTQC) which operates as a committee under the ANTA Board. The NTQC has a membership of industry leaders and State and Territory representation (ANTA, 2000) and replaced the National Training Framework Committee (NTFC) which was established in 1996 (Mitchell et al., 1999, p.111).

The structures described reveal much about the classification of the regulation of VET. The formation of MCEETYA represents an amalgamation of policy interest in vocational and general education at all levels, a blurring of the boundaries between education sectors (secondary, vocational, university) and thus a reduction in classification of the regulatory discourse between policy areas (C-, policy). The formation of ANTA and ANTAMINCO represents a co-operative endeavor to establish a nationally consistent VET system. Whilst States/Territories retain responsibility for their own jurisdiction they are required to comply with the requirements of the ANTA Agreement in order to receive Commonwealth funding. This represents a weakening of the boundaries, and therefore classification for jurisdictional policy for VET, albeit in a co-operative model mediated by financial controls imposed by the Commonwealth (C-, jurisdictional policy making). At the same time there is a strengthening of the position of the Commonwealth in relation to VET policy, that is, a strengthening of classification between the Commonwealth and States/Territories C+, Commonwealth-States/Territories). This reveals an inherent tension in the existing structural arrangements.

The substantial influence of industry in VET policy is evidenced by membership of the ANTA Board, ITABs and the NTQC. These bodies represent a strengthening of classification between industry and other groups with an interest in VET, including teachers (C+, industry), with appropriation of the official pedagogic discourse by industry.

**Current Policy of the National VET System**

At an operational level, *Bridge to the future. Australia’s national strategy for vocational education and training 1998-2003* (hereafter referred to as *Bridge to the future*) sets the overall direction of VET. A new national VET strategy 2004-2010 is currently in development, it is intended that this new strategy will be analysed at a later time and is not discussed further in the current paper. *Bridge to the future* states the mission of VET.

> To ensure that the skills of the Australian labour force are sufficient to support internationally competitive commerce and industry and to provide individuals and enterprises with opportunities to optimise their potential. (ANTA, 1998)

*Bridge to the future* identifies five objectives to underpin the mission statement.

1. Equipping Australians for the world of work.
2. Enhancing mobility in the labour market.
3. Achieving equitable outcomes in VET.
4. Increasing investment in VET.

The first two objectives, unambiguously link VET to work and the labour market. This represents an appropriation of the pedagogic device such that the official pedagogic discourse is dominated by education and training for work. A conclusion that is supported by Strategy 4.2 in *Bridge to the future*.

4.2 The international competitiveness of Australia’s workforce skills will increase compared to OECD countries, particularly against selected benchmark countries.

The expected outcome (as seen in the Mission) is international competitiveness and logically economic prosperity. This form of discourse marginalises liberal education and humanist ideals of education for personal growth, self actualisation or citizenship. These two objectives establish strong classification of regulatory discourse of VET as training for work and the labour market (C+, purpose of VET). Whilst the Mission states that VET should provide ‘individuals and enterprises with opportunities to optimise their potential’ this would seem to be within the context of the labour market or as we will see in objective three the expressed desire to achieve equitable outcomes for identified disadvantaged groups.

The third objective aims to achieve equitable outcomes in VET and strategy 3.1 in *Bridge to the future* identifies five disadvantaged groups.

3.1 Increased and improved access to, and outcomes from, vocational education and training in identified areas of disadvantage, including those areas highlighted in this strategy. (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, people with a disability, women, rural and remote communities, clients from non-English speaking backgrounds)

This objective expresses a desire to alter prevailing ‘distributive rules’ of the pedagogic device such that there is a more even distribution and therefore access to VET. By promoting increased access to VET this objective represents a weakening of classification of VET as training for all groups (C-, universal access). At the same time, the act of singling out particular groups as disadvantaged strengthens the classification between those identified and those that are not identified (C+, disadvantaged groups) revealing a further tension in the policy of VET.

The final two objectives, increasing investment in VET and maximising the value of public VET expenditure, express a financial perspective. They represent a desire on the part of government to shift the balance of the responsibility for funding VET towards industry, consequently weakening classification in respect to responsibility for funding of VET (C-, responsibility for funding). When the strategies that address this issue in *Bridge to the future* are considered, this conclusion is reinforced.

4.3 Industry investment in nationally recognised vocational education and training will increase, on an industry by industry basis, aided by growing acceptance by employers that training is a key instrument in maintaining and improving both enterprise and national competitiveness.

5.1 States/Territories will continue to identify growth derived from efficiencies for the period of the ANTA Agreement.

In respect to the need for States/Territories to continue to identify growth through efficiencies, there is an underpinning assumption that VET will be delivered in a means that allows efficiencies to occur.
When the remainder of the strategies that underpin the objectives in *Bridge to the future* are considered they confirm the findings so far detailed in the current paper and reveal further findings in relation to Bernstein’s construct of framing. Two strategies continue ANTA’s commitment to a national system and a weakening of classification in respect to State/Territory training systems (C-, state/territory training systems).

2.1 All qualifications and statements of attainment issued by registered training organisations will be recognised by other registered training organisation throughout Australia.

2.2 Training organisations registered in one State or Territory will be able to operate in all States and Territories without additional registration processes.

Despite changes in governments, competency based training (CBT) has been a central feature of VET since 1987. *Bridge to the future* continues ANTA’s commitment to CBT.

1.1 Training packages providing comprehensive industry standards (including key competencies) and national qualifications will be available across all industry sectors and widely used in delivery and assessment.

2.3 Key competencies and cross industry competency standards will be integrated into all vocational education and training qualifications.

2.4 All qualifications in training packages will provide clear links to each other, to other qualifications in other industries, and to university courses.

2.5 English language, literacy and numeracy training will be more effectively integrated into vocational education and training products.

Training Packages are developed by industry through ITABs, Recognised Bodies or by enterprises, they are composed of endorsed and non-endorsed components (ANTA, 1997). The endorsed components include national competency standards, assessment guidelines and qualifications endorsed by the NTQC. Non endorsed components are supporting materials including learning materials and professional development materials, these are not to be endorsed by the NTQC. To gain national endorsement, developers must provide evidence of extensive consultation and support within the industry area or enterprise (http://www.anta.gov.au/tpkWhat.asp accessed 26 April 2003). Therefore, control of the development and authentication of legitimate text is dominated by industry led bodies that report to ANTA. Training Packages establish the skills and knowledge required to perform effectively in the workplace, thus legitimising education for work and effectively operating as a regulative discourse that strengthens classification of learning for work from other outcomes of learning (C+, purpose of VET).

Training Packages require registered training organisations to report assessment directly against competency statements in order to receive funding. By representing the outcomes of learning as industry based statements Training Packages effectively replace more “conventional forms” of ‘curriculum’ that require access to recognition and realisation rules of educational institutions with language more familiar to workplaces. This represents a bias in the nature of the pedagogic discourse from one with an educational perspective to one with a workplace perspective, the legitimate text of VET firmly bounded around the language of the workplace (C+, workplace learning curriculum). By juxtaposing workplace competencies against assessment and reporting Training Packages legitimise evaluation criteria of a workplace learning nature representing evidence of the appropriation of evaluation rules of the pedagogic device by industry.

ANTA’s position is that Training Packages describe the skills and knowledge needed to perform effectively in the workplace but do not prescribe how an individual should be trained (http://www.anta.gov.au/tpkWhat.asp accessed 26 April 2003). This would seem to constitute weak framing of the instructional discourse. However, as we will see, this conclusion may be more apparent
than real. If framing relates to selection of content, the mode of communication and site of learning; sequence; pacing; and criteria for evaluation we begin to see some deviation from a uniform conclusion about the framing of instructional discourse.

Within the framework of Training Packages the selection of content for teaching is limited by the competency statements that are endorsed by the NTQC. This regulatory discourse dictates the content that is to be learnt in VET, and constitutes strong framing in relation to the legitimate selection of program content (F+, program content). At the same time strategies 2.3, 2.4 and 2.5 in *Bridge to the future* (see above) require the integration of key competencies; clear links between Training Package qualifications, other qualifications in other industries, and to university courses; and more effective integration of English language, literacy and numeracy training into VET products. These strategies represent a weakening of the boundaries between Training Packages and hence a weakening of classification (C-, qualifications, generic and key competencies).

If we now turn to the selection of legitimate communications we see that Strategy 1.3 in *Bridge to the future* advocates the use of ‘online delivery’.

1.3 The vocational education and training sector will have established a clear presence in the new online delivery environment and will lead the development of new world-class training programs and learning experiences available online.

The promotion of online technology represents state support for a particular form of VET delivery, this constitutes strong framing in respect to the means of communication (F+, online delivery), it also has significant impacts on the possibilities of spatial and temporal elements of the training delivery.

In turning to the selection of legitimate sites of teaching and learning it is possible to argue that the implementation of Training Packages legitimises evaluation criteria of a workplace based nature thus expanding the possibilities of sites of learning beyond institutional environments to workplace environments. If the online environment is also considered as a site of learning then the options are further expanded. Hence it is possible to argue that the current policy represents a weakening of framing of the legitimate sites of learning (F-, sites of learning) albeit with a privileging of the workplace and online environments over more traditional institutional environments. When we consider strategies that aim to increase flexibility and choice in VET this conclusion is reinforced. ANTAs Flexible Learning Advisory Committee (FLAG) defines flexible learning.


Here again we see specific reference to the use of online technology, this time under the banner of ‘e-learning’. By defining flexible learning in terms of expanding choice on what, where and how people learn we see an advocacy for a weakening of framing in respect to the selection of content, site of learning and means of communication as well as an implication of flexibility in sequencing and pacing (F-, content), (F-, site of learning), (F-, communication), (F-, sequence), (F-, pacing). Given earlier comments related to Training Packages and their influence in strengthening framing of content (F+, content), and the promotion of online learning (F+, online delivery) there would appear to be some tension inherent in policy.

Strategy 1.2 in the *Bridge to the future* also relates to flexibility and choice.
1.2 Individuals and enterprises will have maximum choice and flexibility in learning pathways and in the use of vocational education and training products and services, including User choice in New Apprenticeships.

This strategy supports conclusions about framing drawn from the above brief discussion of FLAGs definition of flexible learning, it also promotes New Apprenticeships.

The main characteristics of New Apprenticeships include a contract of training between employer and apprentice or trainee, public funding and support for employers, choice of training provider, a wider range of occupations and industries than previously, competency-based training using national training packages, apprenticeships in schools, and a continued role for group training companies. (http://www.anta.gov.au/gloMtoQ.asp#n accessed 26 April 2003)

New apprenticeships are promoted in strategy 4.1 of Bridge to the future.

4.1 The proportion of the population holding formal vocational education and training qualifications (and parts of qualifications) will grow, with particular attention paid to endeavors to improve the number of intensive training experiences under New Apprenticeships.

FLAGs definition promotes choice of training provider, with training occurring in the workplace as well as schools and group training companies. This policy represents a weakening of framing of the site of learning (F-, site of learning) and reinforces earlier conclusions

Strategies to improved access to and outcomes from VET are embedded in three strategies of Bridge to the future.

1.4 Student and employer satisfaction will increase and there will be correspondingly higher program completion and graduate placement rates.

1.5 The community, industry and students are aware of and value the distinctive experiences and outcomes which can be accessed through registered training organisations. 4.4 Participation in vocational education and training will increase, helping make post-compulsory school education and training a universal experience in Australia.

These strategies endeavor to increase awareness and satisfaction with VET and to make VET available to the broad community. This represents weak classification of access to and participation in VET (C-, universal access) and reinforces an earlier conclusion. Strategy 3.1 represents a desire to ensure that ‘disadvantaged groups’ this issue has been dealt with earlier in this paper under a discussion of objective 3 of Bridge to the future.

CONCLUSION

The description of the regulatory structures and policy of VET and the accompanying analysis demonstrate that Bernstein’s constructs can be usefully applied to an analysis of VET. The discussion demonstrates that current policy is characterised by weak classification of policy areas related to VET, jurisdictional policy making and state/territory systems, access, responsibility for funding, and qualifications, generic and key competencies. There is also evidence of strong classification of Commonwealth and State/Territory roles, the role of industry, the purpose of VET (learning for work), workplace learning curriculum, and identification of disadvantaged groups.
These findings identify two ambiguities in the classification of policy. Firstly, there is weak classification of jurisdictional policy making whilst there is strong classification of the roles of the Commonwealth and States/Territories. Secondly, there is weak classification of access whilst there is strong classification through the specific identification of disadvantaged groups.

The discussion has also made some observations about the impact of policy on the framing of VET. The analysis is consistent in concluding that policy represents weak framing in relation to the site of learning with a privileging of workplace learning, the sequence and pacing of learning. The analysis also reveals that there is ambiguity in relation to the framing of content and communications with a privileging of online delivery.

Five broad observations are made.

1. The membership of VET regulatory institutions (ANTA Board, ITABs and NTQC) demonstrates that the official pedagogic discourse of VET is dominated by industry.
2. Policy demonstrates that the pedagogic device has been appropriated such that the official pedagogic discourse is dominated by education and training for work.
3. Policy shows that the distributive rules of the current pedagogic device are attempting to increase access to VET.
4. Policy shows that the evaluation rules of the pedagogic device are dominated by industry which has legitimised a pedagogic discourse that privileges assessment against workplace competencies.
5. The pedagogic device also privileges workplace and online learning environments over more traditional institutional environments.

I would now like to turn to a brief discussion of how the analysis in this paper will be used to underpin the Doctoral research flagged at the beginning of this paper. In examining the impact of online technology on TAFE teachers practice I believe that there are two points at which pedagogic discourse is recontextualised. Firstly at the point where teachers implement policy (either knowingly or unknowingly) to determine how they intend to engage in teaching practice. Secondly at the point where teachers’ intentions are recontextualised into implemented teaching practice. An additional recontextualisation occurs at the point where learning occurs but will not be examined in the research. Therefore, there are three points at which the intended research must gather and analyse data: at the policy level; and the level of teachers’ intentions in the use of online technology for teaching; and, at the level of teachers’ implementation of online technology for teaching. The current paper represents data collection and analysis at the policy level, it will be used as a platform from which to collect and analyse data about teachers intended and implemented practice in using online technology for teaching.

The work presented in the current paper has been a challenge to ask myself the question: Can I use Bernstein’s constructs in a meaningful way to engage in a conversation about VET policy? In Bernsteinian terms: Do I have access to the recognition rules that allow me to create legitimate text through realisation rules? My hope is that others will judge this progress and provide me with feedback.

REFERENCES


