

## **Teaching for the ‘New Work Order’: Empowerment or Exploitation?**

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**Abstract:** Vocational Education and Training (VET) programs addressing the needs of workers in the ‘New Work Order’ have increasingly emphasised the development of communication, analytical, negotiation and decision-making skills over technical skills. Education for work has often been seen as a means of empowering workers to take up the opportunities available to them in the new ‘democratic’ workplaces of the last twenty years by developing the skills to contribute to workplace change through participation in collaborative decision-making processes.

This paper is based on the findings of a study that explored the ways in which trainers take up and work within the current discourses of VET. Data from interviews with trainers as well as observations of them at work are analysed and presented in this paper to highlight the ways in which they inadvertently position their students as compliant and powerless workers, despite the rhetoric that learning-for-work will prepare them to become active agents of change in democratic workplaces. I argue that this contradiction is due, in part, to the ways in which the trainers’ classed identities intersect with discourses of VET in powerful and complex ways. Their understanding of work, learning-for-work and teaching-for-work is constructed and mediated through their social class positionings and is enacted through classroom practices.

### **Introduction**

This paper is based on the findings of a critical case study that investigated the ways in which the professional identities of teachers and trainers are shaped by the discourses of vocational adult education (VET) and enacted through classroom practices. Poststructuralism, the major theoretical framework underpinning the study stresses identity as evolving, non-unitary and contradictory (Weedon, 1999; Grossberg, 1996) and constituted through language (Linn, 1996; Weedon, 1997, 1999; Luke, 1999; Davies, 2000; McCarthey, 1998). While social class is “a contested term with multiple dimensions and levels” (Weedon 1999, p. 134), the broader notions of social class informed by Bourdieu’s metaphors of economic, cultural, social and symbolic capital (1987) are useful in providing ways of thinking beyond modernist class categories and are relevant to theorizing in this study and understanding how teachers’ professional identities and their classroom practices are shaped.

Data was collected in 2001 from semi-structured individual interviews with four VET educators in separate sites in metropolitan Melbourne as well as observation of each of them at work during five hours of class time. Interviews were also conducted with two students from each class. The texts of classroom practice and interview texts were analysed using Critical Discourse Analysis techniques (Kamler, 1997; Luke, 1997;

Fairclough, 1989) in order to reveal the ways in which spoken language works to “construct representations of the world, social identities and social relationships” (Luke, 1999, p.170). The findings of the study suggested that the discourses of gender, race and class intersect in complex and often contradictory ways shaping trainers’ responses to VET, their students needs, their relationships with them and the pedagogies they privilege in their classrooms. In this paper however, I present excerpts of data from only two of the training sites to highlight how the trainers’ understanding of work, learning-for-work and teaching-for-work is constructed and mediated through their social class positionings and enacted through their classroom practices.

In what follows, I provide contextual information about the research sites from which the data presented in this paper has been sourced, give an overview of relatively recent changes to work and learning-for-work and then present an analysis of some of the data from KC Automotive Industries and Rochedale Skills Training Centre.

### **The Research Sites: A Contextual Overview**

Excerpts of data from interviews with two trainer participants, Jill and Mohindar and observations of them at work are analysed and presented in this paper to highlight the ways in which their understandings of work and teaching-for-work is constructed through classroom practices.

Jill is a trainer of the Foundry Elective of the ‘Vehicle Industry Certificate’ (VIC) at KC Automotive Industries, a large vehicle manufacturing plant. She is in her early fifties, has been involved in workplace education for ten years and has taught the VIC for eight of those years. Before that, she was involved in literacy education and special needs education in secondary schools and colleges of Technical and Further Education (TAFE). She has undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in teaching and education.

The VIC, an accredited and nationally recognised competency-based course covers an introduction to metallurgy, manufacturing processes such as core making, pattern making, mould making, fettling and salvage, quality assurance and continuous improvement. Jill’s class consists of eight male foundry workers who vary in age from early twenties through to mid-fifties and come from a range of countries including: Turkey Greece, Bosnia, Samoa and Tuvalu. English is a second language for all the students, most of whom are long-term Australian residents. Participation in the course is voluntary, an incentive to complete the certificate course is offered in the form of increased salary. As workers satisfactorily progress through the various stages of the certificate they also progress through a series of salary increments. In order to gain promotion to other positions in the company, workers must complete the VIC.

Mohindar is a trainer of ‘Certificate II in Hospitality’ at Rochedale Skills Training Centre in northern metropolitan Melbourne. He has extensive experience in the hospitality industry, having worked in a range of positions, and was the Catering Manager at a prestigious International hotel in Bombay (now known as Mumbai) before immigrating to Australia from India in 1995. He has been a trainer for only 4

years, has qualifications in hospitality management from India and a Certificate in Workplace Training.

Certificate II in Hospitality, an accredited full-time course covers topics such as communications, food and beverage service, hospitality regulations, customer relations and occupations health and safety. Mohindar's class consists of twelve long-term unemployed people ranging in age from 18 to 41. About half of the students are Anglo-Australian, the others are either Turkish, Fijian-Indian, Australian Aboriginal or second generation Australian of southern European descent. Although a few students attend courses on a fee-for-service basis, that is, they meet the course costs themselves, the majority do not pay any fees. They are referred to the course by their case managers, employment personnel who work closely with long-term unemployed clients or clients who are at risk of long-term unemployment. For most students, their participation is linked to the continuation of unemployment benefits.

### **Changing Work and Changing Education for Work**

Significant global economic restructuring characterised by the spread of new electronic technologies and the internationalism of products and trade has resulted in major changes to work in western industrialised nations. 'Old capitalist' economies in which there was mass production of goods characterised by work broken into repetitive tasks were overseen by hierarchical management structures. These economies have given way to Post-Fordist or post Post-Capitalist economies (Drucker 1993 in Gee, Hull and Lankshear, 1996 p. 26) in which workers are multiskilled, understand and experience *entire* manufacturing work processes and contribute to decision-making about their work. Flatter and more consultative management structures have emerged in the New Capitalist workplace, creating a 'new work order' involving "new social identities: new bosses (now 'coaches' and 'leaders'), new middle managers (now 'team leaders'), new customers (now also 'partners' and 'insiders', who are said to drive the whole process)" (Gee, Hull et al. 1996). Even employees on the bottom of the hierarchy in manufacturing industry, such as production line workers are expected to contribute to areas of decision-making previously regarded as the domain of middle and upper management. They are expected to contribute to quality improvement strategies such as Total Quality Management (TQM) and Continuous Improvement by participating in collaborative work teams such as Quality Circles (QC) which aim to analyse problems, develop solutions and improve work practices. According to Edwards and Nicoll, "The multiskilled, flexible worker has been promoted as paradigmatic of the economically successful organisation, moving from task to task, team working, problem solving, and learning as they so do" (Edwards and K. 2000).

Education and training is seen as a means to achieve the "construction of 'new kinds of people' with values, beliefs and identities to the fit the 'new capitalism'" (Jackson 2000). Sheldrake (1997 reported in Robinson 1998, p. 119) compares what he calls the current 'knowledge revolution' as having as profound an impact on work as the industrial revolution. Knowledge is regarded as a highly significant new form of capital. Increasingly, learning for work focuses on the development of what Jackson and Jordan refer to as "soft-skill" education options (2000, p.3) such as communications skills, team-work and collaborative skills over technical skills education.

Despite the rhetoric of the new work order and associated education and training as a means of empowering workers through multiskilling and allowing them a 'voice' to contribute to workplace change, there are many scholars who are skeptical of the benefits to workers of the New Work Order. According to Kincheloe, these seemingly "'democratic' discourses ... can be used for hegemonic purposes. Instead of striving for worker empowerment, plans like these have often degenerated into deceptive slogans designed to manipulate workers to support the status quo" (Kincheloe 1999, p.54). Drawing on research by Graham (1993), Waterhouse and Sefton believe "the 'new' workplace is neither as idyllic or as 'empowering' of workers as many people claim, ... The much publicised flat management structure is merely another way of controlling workers, through an 'ideology of egalitarianism'" (1997 p.265). According to Foley, "Capitalists and their agents (managers, supervisors, some workplace trainers) ... use a variety of means to try and (Foley 1998, p.149). At the same time as management encourages and expects worker loyalty and respect, decreased conflict between workers and supervisors, greater productivity and reduced worker turnover (Kincheloe 1999, p.43), they maintain wage levels and 'downsize' their workforces.

In what follows, I present data that shows the ways in which classroom learning tasks that are intended to empower students to contribute to workplace change and decision-making, inadvertently construct blue-collar workers and unemployed students as compliant and powerless players in the new work order. Given the discourses of economic rationalism that have increasingly shaped VET, this is not entirely unexpected. However, I want to argue that trainers' social class positioning is significant in shaping the ways in which they take up and work with these discourses.

### **Learning to 'downsize' and improve work practices**

Mohindar's classes focus on teaching students the communication skills, collaborative team-work skills and report writing skills intended to develop their problem solving skills and confidence to take responsibility for improved work practices. In particular, the learning Mohindar tasks usually sets his students require them to negotiate solutions to problems which resemble those Mohindar believes are most likely to occur in a hospitality workplace. During one of the observed classes Mohindar allocated each student a role in a fictitious five-star hotel he describes as "Mohindar's Hotel" as well as allocating himself to the role of General Manager. The roles given to the students included security manager, sales and marketing manager, catering manager and accountant. Each student 'manager' was asked to "start thinking like a manager" and to develop and report on a series of initiatives that would result in cost saving for the area of the hotel for which they had responsibility. In her role as security manager, Linda, one of the students, devised cost saving measures by replacing a number of security staff in various parts of the hotel with surveillance cameras. During the report-back session she says:

*See, I had two staff per floor wandering around with 55 rooms each. So I got rid of half of them by installing a \$250,000 security system which replaced most of the staff. I took all the staff off the floors and put cameras in the place instead so that there was only one person that roamed all five floors and I put a camera down at the reception desk and the carpark and*

*in the lobby and all that sort of stuff. It's all the cameras, that reduces staff by half.... Actually when I started out I started with \$1,464,000 in costs including uniforms and wages. And then I got down and cut the cost of uniforms because they're going to pay for half of them themselves and installed the security system. When I worked it out I reduced the cost to \$775,000.*

It is clear that the efforts of students who take up and work within the discourses of economic rationalism are valued in Mohindar's class. Speaking in his role as General Manager, Mohindar says to the class:

*I like this security manager..If you come up with crazy ideas or extravagant ideas we will lose money but this security manager, I like her. Do you know what I mean? I actually think that this security manager, next year, we can give her a company car and put an extra \$1,000 in as a bonus for her wages.*

Similarly, another student's idea of replacing people with machines in the housekeeping department of Mohindar's Five-Star Hotel is one that Mohindar enthusiastically endorses. He goes on to discuss the merits of technology as a cost-saving strategy, citing an example of a brewery the class had visited on a recent excursion, as the epitome of a productive technology-based industry:

**Mohindar:** *What happened when we went to the excursion to Clarisbrooke, what was the thing that struck you the most?*

**Student A :** *No people.*

**Mohindar:** *You know it's the largest brewery in the southern hemisphere. I think it's the third or fourth largest brewery in the world and the largest in the southern hemisphere. And the first thing that strikes you when you go there is that it's almost deserted but hey they're still producing a lot of beer. What's happened?*

**Student A:** *Machinery, cost effective technology.*

**Mohindar:** *That is technology, Now you might have your moral discussions and say "Oh they're sacking people and making people redundant" but I'm going to tell you [Student B: Well at least they can enjoy their beer every night] [laughs].*

**Mohindar:** *Exactly, I'm going to tell you that companies, companies and hotels are replacing for good or for bad or for worse or whatever you might say, banks are reducing staff. You've just reduced staff, you might have had to sack a few people and I feel really sorry for them but like I said to you yesterday, a hotel is not here to feel sorry for people. They're here to make money. You've actually made me money, you've made me say, "Ok let me install this technology worth half a million dollars, but see how much it will save me in the next five years". You've done that haven't you?*

**Student A:** *Yeah*

**Mohindar:** *Consciously replaced manpower with technology.*

**Student A:** *I'll be real popular won't I? [laughs]*

**Mohindar:** *OK, it might not make you win any popularity contests...  
but as far as your job's concerned you've done me a favor, you've  
saved us money.*

In this role-play sound business practice and worker welfare are constructed in opposition to each other. 'Tough' managers who are able to distance themselves from the effects of economic rationalism have on their staff, are highly valued.

Assigning managerial roles to the participants in this class is a curious strategy given the sorts of jobs they might realistically hope to obtain as long-term unemployed people with no management qualifications. Certificate II in Hospitality is aimed at preparing them to take up semiskilled jobs in the hospitality industry. It is certainly not intended to prepare them for managerial roles in which they might need to make decisions about staffing and cost reduction. Furthermore, few are likely to find employment in a five-star hotel in any capacity. *They* may well become the victims of cost saving measures themselves - most are currently unemployed because they have already experienced the effects of economic rationalism, having been made redundant from previous jobs.

It could be argued that such a role-play might enable the students to understand the nature of their fragile positions in the workplace and to recognise early moves to downsize which will result in their redundancy (although this recognition does not empower them to affect change). However, in effect, this role-play activity positions them to understand their own actual potential role as subservient to the kinds of people they are role-playing. By playing the boss, they come to understand *their* place in the hierarchy and the need to fill it humbly: they know the boss knows best because they've been the boss.

In similar ways to Mohindar, Jill's classroom practices at KC Automotive Industries also focus on developing the collaborative teamwork and report writing skills that will result in students being able to participate in Quality Circles and other Quality Control initiatives. Being able to identify work practices in the foundry which they believe are inefficient and/or unsafe, and formulate and articulate suggestions and plans for improvement is an increasingly important part of a foundry worker's job. Jill reinforces and endorses the importance of these discourses by constructing the men's ability to identify product defects as proof that management has invested wisely in education for their workers. It the "ultimate test" of their knowledge, the program's *raison d'être*. She says to them during class:

*If you can find defects and trace back the possible reasons for that defect, it's only going to make for better quality engines. That's probably the ultimate test of your knowledge. That's what we've been training you for, thinking about how you're going to fix things, make things better...that is probably the most important outcome for the people that pay for this course to be run at KC Automotive Industries.*

It is often believed by management that by taking up discourses of Continuous Improvement blue-collar workers are given a voice to actively participate to workplace change. However, it can also be argued that the modest financial incentives

they receive for suggestions that result in improved practices is insufficient, given their contribution to reducing the work of middle management through their suggestions for improved work practices resulting in greater productivity. Furthermore, if workers are able to identify component defects in parts before they leave the foundry for the next section of the vehicle manufacturing process, Quality Control departments can be downsized and their peers' jobs made redundant.

Foundry workers at KC Automotive Industries are generally immigrant workers with limited English language proficiency who often have little choice over the type of employment they obtain. The foundry is a dirty and uncomfortable work environment and there is a common view within the motor vehicle industry that of all unskilled work, jobs in the foundry are the least desirable. Many workers move from the foundry to the assembly line as soon as they can. Given its reputation within the company as a poor work environment, convincing workers to take more interest in their work and take up TQM discourses is difficult and not part of the foundry 'culture'. Recognising this problem Jill says during our interview:

*I try to inspire them to see it as something very wonderful rather than everybody dreads the foundry and sees it as awful, they actually get a few more dollars for working there. What I try to do is turn it around and say, this is the most wonderful place you work because of the magic that's going on in that furnace, the chemistry, the wonderful charge of that metal. Along the way I'm constantly saying "Isn't this wonderful, isn't it fascinating and it's much more complex than you think and I bet you didn't know that", terms like that.*

A view of the foundry as a wonderfully magical place might be seen to be as naïve, out-of-touch with the men's working reality and reflecting the relative safety of a middle-class positioning. It is the opinion of someone commenting from a distance, someone who is able to delight in the spectacle of molten metal poured from huge crucibles - not the view of someone who works among the fumes and the dirt everyday. There is no doubt that Jill's intention is to build the men's sense of self-worth and to encourage them to escape the stigma of working in the least desirable area of the plant. However, in doing so, she might be seen to inadvertently negate their experiences.

### **Education for Empowerment or Exploitation**

Given the ways in which the discourses of new capitalist societies "coerce and manipulate workers to be optimally productive instruments" (Foley 1998, p.149) who struggle to assert their own interests, how realistic is it to expect that VET practitioners can realize the potential of what Kincheloe calls 'Democratic Vocational Education' where workers can "begin to see themselves in relation to the world around them and to perceive the workplace as a site within larger economies of power and privilege (Kincheloe 1999, p 206)? To a large degree, the highly prescriptive nature of VET curriculum is devised in close consultation with industry and in many instances, course funding bodies may be the employers themselves or government bodies who work with industry to develop curriculum that fits the needs of employers. In the current economic climate where invested training dollars must result in

improved productivity, teachers may have little opportunity to promote critical thinking and to teach students to question existing hierarchies. According to Kincheloe, "... in the everyday world of vocational education, legitimized discourses insidiously tell teachers what labor practices are legitimate, what work skills are indispensable, what instructional methods may be utilized and what views of success may be taught (1999, p. 2000).

It is not surprising then, that the discourses of VET shape the students in this research as compliant players in the New Work Order. However, it is the ways in which Jill and Mohindar take up and work with the discourses of economic rationalism that is of interest. Identities are constructed within discourses and "... teachers and students are caught up in multiple discourses, positioned in multiple ways – sometimes as speaking subjects mobilising the discourses through which they have been subjected/made subject to powerful and liberatory ends, at other times in ways that deprive them of choices and the possibility of acting in powerful ways (Davies 1994:79). Mohindar and Jill's privileging of employers' perspectives above and beyond what is promoted by the prescribed curriculum, indicates the ways in which the many discourses of which they have membership, intersect to shape their understandings of work and learning-for-work. I want to argue that these understandings are, to a significant degree, shaped by their classed positionings. In Mohindar's case, he comes from a "middle to upper class family from Calcutta" and during our interview, explicitly attributes his style of teaching, the ways in which he relates to the students and what he ascertains to be their educational needs, to his background. While Jill does not explicitly name her social class in the same ways as Mohindar, her frequent reference to her university qualifications and her lifestyle reflect a degree of cultural, economic and social capital not shared by her students.

The trainers' classroom practices encourage their students to accept their place within the hierarchy of the new work order in ways far beyond what is promoted by the prescribed curriculum. For example, Mohindar's privileging of management perspectives in the role-play tasks he sets the students, teaches them knowledge which is of little benefit to them in material terms or in ways which enable them to challenge the status quo. In fact, these practices are more likely to disempower them by providing them with a 'tantalising' sample of the status they are unlikely to achieve. In having experienced the ways of thinking and the imperatives for action of those in positions of seniority and influence, students may be inadvertently positioned to passively accept the status quo. It also appears that the role-play activity serves purposes for Mohindar other than simply as a training strategy. In casting himself in this 'drama' as the manager of a prestigious hotel, he may be vicariously reclaiming some of the status that he held when he was a manager of a five star hotel. In Jill's case, by encouraging them to develop more positive attitudes to the foundry, she inadvertently teaches them to accept their 'lot', to make the best of what they have at the bottom of the worker hierarchy and remain within the foundry-worker discourses of which they are currently a part.

## **Conclusion**

The potential for VET to construct students as compliant and powerless players in the New Work Order is significant. Its fundamental purpose in contributing to greater productivity in 'mean-and-lean' workplaces, combined with the ways in which "CBT



also provides greater surveillance over the workforce through its administrative structure” (Mulcahy and James 1999, p.92) are factors over which most VET trainers have little control. To some degree, trainers are themselves also compliant players in the New Work Order, suffering ‘downsizing’, restructuring, increased accountability and surveillance of their own work practices. However, the ways in which they take up and work with the discourses of VET and the ways in which their own positionings shape their understandings of work and learning-for work are also significant. Because “relations of power in the classroom are neither straightforward nor easily accessible, given our ‘blindness’ and positionality in relation to others’ experiences” (Durie 1996, p.141), teachers’ need to interrogate their classroom practices and to be vigilant about crossing what Durie refers to as the invisible lines between liberatory and oppressive classroom practices.

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