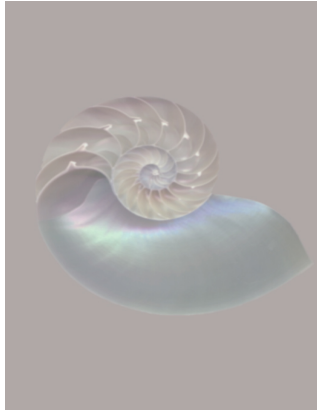


Chapter Two

A Method Assemblage: Experience and Theory



Where do I stand in the tension that is the ontic politics of the journey into being of the Training Package? I am there in the middle – as a participant, observer, questioner, critic, advocate, puzzled by-stander and researcher in the confusion of multiple practices; capturing people and things, cataloguing them as objects for interrogation, arranging them as exhibits; knowing that around me and beyond me are more empirical ‘materials’ and deep intellectual traditions to be cascaded into an artifact of less than 100,000 words; intact – with their stories and historical moments: So much to do; so many threads.

This is a study in empirical ontology in which I recount stories about how and why the Training Package came to be articulated as a learning management technology that works with other management technologies and with people to perform vocational work based learning in Australia. The stories are drawn from many sites: the archives of technical education in Australia; a national training authority, a state government training authority and its predecessors, several workplaces and the shifting arenas in which the Australian state and Commonwealth government agencies and their allies engage in the business of remaking the knowledge economy. Throughout this study I have been both a worker and a researcher; a participant in the work practices that are the subject of this study and an observer of them. I have moved between my worker self and researcher self with different degrees of comfort and ease; there have been days when the grist for two mills has become very messily ground together; occasions when the question of consent to appear has had to be transacted *in situ* and recorded after the event.

The ontological question on which this empirical study rests is about agency in the maintenance and changing of modes of ordering: put simply – what is it that causes practices and things to cohere in a given pattern; and how do practices and things manage to shake loose and form new patterns? This is a question about new knowledge as practices and agents that interfere with and participate in the formation of realities (Mol 2002). It is not an epistemological study about systems of *knowing about* practices and representations of realities, but a study about knowledge as *enacted* in practice.

In this chapter I bring together theory and method and my own experience as a worker in the education ‘industry’ to explain how I have assembled knowledge about the enactment of the Training Package and its role as actor. My own experience is taken into account because it is one of the vehicles that convey the how and why of the Training Package. In other words, I am in the story of necessity; if I eliminate myself from the labyrinth the thread becomes frayed. Nor could I adopt a disinterested third-person approach to the research that would have obliged me to become a stranger¹ in my own familiar territory.²

Experience and theory

The question of the training package has coalesced with others about what I would now name as the ontological politics (Mol 1999) of organised learning. I have puzzled about the meaning of schooling (when I was a teacher); about the meaning of teaching (as a lecturer in ‘teaching methods’); about the meaning of ‘training’ (as a curriculum designer in a vocational training authority); and about the nature of the relationship between the workplace and vocational training (as a participant in projects to design a new training structure for the engineering industry). These puzzles came into sharp focus during my work as a manager in a university of technology that offers vocational certificates and diplomas as well as undergraduate and graduate degrees. There is a discourse in this institution about learning at work; and learning through reflection on work practice. However this is muted by a discourse about lectures, readings, essays and reflections on theory that sits more comfortably with the traditions, institutional practices, work roles and architecture of the academy. This is the question I now most often return to – how do these academic practices continue to shape ‘structured’³ vocational learning, particularly when rhetorical weight has for some time been given to the need for learning based on work skills and relations, and for recognition of skills and knowledge developed at work.

The large and lumpy propositions that emerged in response to my puzzles sit most readily, but not entirely well, in the sociology of education. In past explorations I found the going difficult because the phenomena offered as a framework for study – class, family, community, gender, ethnicity, alienation, deviance, anomie and so on – did not furnish satisfactory points of departure. Sociologists of education have argued that curriculum plays a role in the economic reproduction of class relations because the school as an institution ‘corresponds’ with the structure of capitalism (Bowles & Gintis 1976); or that curriculum plays a role in both the cultural and economic reproduction of class relations in advanced industrial societies because it is a hegemonic tool of capital (Apple 1979, 1980); and that it produces technical/administrative knowledge that serves the interests of the most powerful classes in society (Apple 1982). In accounting for such phenomena (and for resistances to them) educational sociology has pointed, somewhat asymmetrically, to the agency of capitalists, teachers and students, and to the singularly fixed nature of capitalist social structures (for example MacDonald 1980; Willis 1976, 1979). The possibilities for change in such analyses hinge on manipulation of the nature of systems and things (for example, better curriculum documentation, smaller classes and non-gendered text books). The problem for me in these laudable recommendations is that there is no sense of *how* the reforms will be achieved and what the impact would be on teaching and learning practice. I would have been relieved if during earlier attempts at research⁴ I had had the benefit of decentring critical reflections such as those of John Law, who, in addressing the question of how social science might describe complex, messy and sometimes incoherent realities writes:

I want to divest concern with method of its inheritance of hygiene. I want to move from the moralist idea that only if you do your methods properly you will lead a healthy research life – the idea that you will discover specific truths about which all reasonable people will agree at least for the time being. I want to divest it of what I will call singularity: the idea that indeed there are definite and limited sets of processes to be discovered if only you lead a healthy research life. I also want to divest it of a commitment to a particular version of politics: the idea that unless you attend to certain more or less determinate phenomena (class, gender, ethnicity would be examples) then your work has no political relevance (Law 2004, p. 9)

A small ordering moment in my imbroglío⁵ of puzzlements occurs around the question of how/why their embodiments and enactments (for example, as curriculum and the Training Package) come to have agency and power. Law’s desire to divest method of a commitment to ‘more or less determinate phenomena’ speaks to the

difficulties I have experienced in accommodating my question within theories of class relations, schooling and political interests. The problem I have with the ‘more or less determinate phenomena’ is that they are determinate: that they have power relations being constituents of structures rather than embodied, in myriad different ways through practice. Through my own experience as a practitioner – one of a collective of teachers, teacher managers, curriculum, administrators, policy, projects, classrooms, strategic plans, financial projections, fees, Equivalent Full-time Student Units (EFTSUs) and Student Contact Hours (SCHs), databases, politicians, tenders, diagrams, minutes, agendas and the like – the educational and sociological research tools at my disposal lost their grip. As everything and everyone I worked with became the ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’⁶ of reflection and analysis, I found that what I *most* needed to account for was the ordinary stuff of everyday life that falls between the categories. And so I have sought out theoretical orientations that provide tools to unpack and make meaning from accounts of practice.

To illustrate the way I assembled these theoretical orientations, I tell two stories about my work in the 1980s. The timeline (Table 2.1) aligns the particularities of this work with the context of relevant government policy and resulting industrial reform projects in the period of the first two stories and leading up to the introduction of the Training Package.

Table 2.1: Timeline of policy and work roles

| Year | Government/industry policy changes | My work roles |
|------|--|--|
| 1983 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hawke Commonwealth Labor Government elected; inherits a diversity of labour market and school-work transition programs targeted at unemployed youth. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> TAFE Distance Education Studies Officer. Evaluator, 'Transition Education Case Study No. 16' (Victorian Transition Education Advisory Committee). |
| 1984 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commonwealth Government enacted an agreement – 'The Accord' - with the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) for industrial relations reform. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> TAFE Distance Education Studies Officer. Curriculum designer in a nationally funded project to establish a program for early school leavers unplaced in a Tertiary Orientation Program (TOP). |
| 1985 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report of the Commonwealth Government Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs. Victorian Government introduces the 'Work-Study' traineeship program for early school leavers. Commonwealth Government introduced the Australian Traineeship System (ATS). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Curriculum Coordinator in TAFE, Victoria for the Work-Study traineeship program and the Australian Traineeship System. Executive officer for state-level ATS Curriculum Committees. |
| 1986 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> (September) ACTU/ Trade Development Council (TDC) Mission to Europe on industry restructuring. | |
| 1987 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Report of the ACTU/TDC Mission: <i>Australia Reconstructed</i> (AGPS June 1987). Government/ACTU second tier wage agreement. National Metal Trades Federation of Unions/ Metal Trades Industry Association (MTFU/MTIA) project to design new training structures. Victorian Metal Industry Training & Career Development Project. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appointed as manager of a Victorian Ministry of Education project initiated in response to national MTFU/MTIA project. As part of above role commissioned to design an articulated Metal & Engineering Training and Career Structure. |
| 1988 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Agreement on Metal Industry Award based on 14 level broadband classification replacing 310 individual job categories. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Victorian Education Foundation (VEF) manager of projects to support the introduction of the Victorian Metal and Engineering Industry Training System. |
| 1989 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Department of Employment, Education and Training Mission to Europe on training reform. | |
| 1990 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establishment of the National Training Board and introduction of competency based training. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> VEF manager of projects to develop competency standards for employees under the Federated Clerks Award and design tools to enable the recognition of prior learning. |
| 1992 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Commonwealth Act to establish the Australian National Training Authority. | |
| 1994 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ANTA commences operations. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assistant Secretary in Ministry of Education with portfolio responsibility for vocational programs jointly sponsored by schools and TAFE, and TAFE and universities. |
| 1996 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Federal election – Howard Liberal (Conservative) Government elected. | |
| 1997 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training Packages introduced. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deputy Dean at a dual sector university; responsible for VET programs in community services, languages and vocational preparation. |

Story 1: A small curriculum war

In June 1985 I was quite abruptly transferred from my primary job as a distance education officer, to the head office of the State Government statutory authority for TAFE (the TAFE Board), where my position was to be ‘Traineeship Curriculum Coordinator’. The background to this unexpected change is as follows:

In January 1985 the Hawke Labor Government released a report on policy responses to changes in the youth labour market, the *Commonwealth Government Committee of Inquiry into Labour Market Programs*.⁷ The report argued that youth unemployment was a result of structural changes in the labour market and recommended new approaches to post-school employment and training programs.⁸ One recommendation adopted by the Commonwealth Government was to introduce a training program for 15–19-year-olds comprising twelve months training and paid employment. The resultant Australian Traineeship System (ATS) was similar in some respects to the traditional model of apprenticeship, in that ATS training combined school and workplace learning. However, workplace learning in the ATS was to be ‘structured’ (see endnote 3), unlike the embedded on-the-job learning characteristic of apprenticeships. This created the need for a new form of training curriculum.

At the same time, the Victorian State Labor Government decided to use the framework for the ATS to mount a vocational program of on- and off-the-job training for early school leavers. The ‘Youth Guarantee Program’ was managed by the Department of Labour, and the TAFE Board was allocated the task of designing and accrediting curriculum for the ‘Work-Study’ courses, and for coordinating the training that took place in its colleges. In the view of the Department of Labour, the TAFE Board moved too slowly to organise this new initiative⁹, and, in frustration at the perceived delay, the department demanded that the position of Curriculum Coordinator be filled forthwith. In the process of these negotiations I was named as a nominee unless the TAFE Board could quickly find an alternative.

My nomination was a happy accident of timing. I had just completed work on a curriculum model for early school leavers as part of a Commonwealth Government sponsored project to explore curriculum options for early school leavers.¹⁰ In designing the course I had used recommendations in the Kirby report as a design template. When a draft was circulated it came to the notice of the report’s author who, as Deputy Secretary of the Victorian Department of Labour, was now responsible for the Youth Guarantee Program.

This was my first experience in a government 'head office' and, somewhat naively, I thought my curriculum model would be adopted simply because it had been endorsed by a Deputy Secretary. This was, of course, not the case: the Deputy Secretary's jurisdiction did not cover the TAFE Board; and the Curriculum Branch expected that I would follow TAFE Board, not Department of Labour, rules and protocols. Curriculum development commenced with a job analysis (not with the recommendations in a policy paper, as mine would do); accredited courses were based on a one-to-one relationship with an individual job (and did not encompass learning about work in general and career paths); and the curriculum document had to specify the learning process in detail (and not leave the sequence of learning and the design of activities up to teachers, as I had planned).

A settlement was eventually reached whereby the traineeship curriculum would include reference to the Commonwealth policy and include course content related to broad work roles. However, the one-to-one relationship between course and job role would be retained through a process of accrediting each occupational 'stream' as an individual program that would be known as the *Certificate in Vocational Studies (Clerical Assistant)/(Laboratory Assistant)/(Gardening Assistant)* and so on. In addition, the mandatory learning schedules, textbooks, and learning and assessment tasks were to be included in the curriculum specification.

Within months of my appointment, the Victorian pilot program was subsumed into the ATS, and control of curriculum development shifted away from the TAFE Board. Curriculum advisory committees, called Industry Working Groups (IWGs), were convened by state government labour and industry departments on behalf of the Commonwealth Department of Employment Education and Training (DEET). Employer and union peak bodies would nominate their own IWG representatives and advise the Commonwealth Government accordingly. The result was a series of large committees (of fourteen to twenty people) on which industry and government members outweighed those from TAFE, and which met in venues other than the TAFE Board.

The shift in the balance of power was unmistakable. Previously settled matters were open to the scrutiny of outsiders who asked outsider questions about matters such as course content and schedules and the method for analysing vocational skill requirements. Some industry representatives advocated the sort of changes I had previously tried to enact. Both the curriculum development process and the structure of the courses submitted for accreditation gradually changed as industry agendas were

taken into account: many employer and union representatives were more concerned with broad 'transferable' skill development than training in specific task skills, and some aspects of the job analysis were replaced by research into changing work roles.

There was concern over the sheer volume of paperwork generated – how would committee members have sufficient time to read all that detail? As the executive officer responsible for preparing agenda papers and reports, I added synopses and grey-tone coding to make it easier for members to work through the documents. After a time I began using diagrams to illustrate the course structure and contents, and relegated the details to an appendix to each report. The diagrams and summaries became the focus of meeting deliberations with only occasional forays into the appendices – usually when a union representative detected that a trade demarcation may have been breached by the inclusion of apprenticeship content in the curriculum. The amount of work completed at each meeting increased and the overall time taken to design courses decreased markedly. The end products: documents containing newly formatted courses schedules went on their way to the Accreditation Board accompanied by letters of commendation, signed by the chair of the IWG on behalf of all members.

Reflecting on the small curriculum war

These are unremarkable scenarios – the sort of work that goes on in offices every day. But the work had consequences: courses were accredited; young people were employed and enrolled; new work roles were created; and money and new ideas circulated. And there was clearly something at stake – why else did we battle over versions of 'the curriculum'; why else would employers and union officials spend valuable time debating the content of training courses? Perhaps small curriculum wars are not really so small.

By following the curriculum around the TAFE system, outside the realms of the development process itself, I found that it was significantly implicated as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer 1989) that mediated relations between the social worlds of the TAFE system. When a TAFE College was authorised to offer nominated accredited courses an associated level of funding followed; the subject disciplines in the courses determined which teachers would be employed; systems of promotion within colleges were based on the management of specified course groupings, as were the organisational structures of colleges and the TAFE Board itself. The curriculum also acted as a boundary object between TAFE and the world of industry, enabling both TAFE and industry representatives to attach their own specific and different meanings

