'Mapping the social relations of the Australian Vocational Education and Training sector'

Lauri Grace
Faculty of Education, Deakin University, Australia

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Lecturer and PhD Candidate
Faculty of Education
Deakin University
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'Real people really get hurt by the workings of language, power, ideology and Discourse' (Gee 1996, p.ix).

Under the provisions of the Australian Vocational Education and Training sector, employees in workplaces can be awarded nationally recognised educational qualifications either by completing a program of learning and assessment or by undergoing a formal assessment of the existing knowledge and skills that they use on the job every day. Both processes are shaped by national regulatory texts that are developed with government funding and endorsed by government authorities. As an educator involved in workplace learning and assessment for more than ten years I have experienced a growing sense of disquiet as the texts themselves, and the processes they give rise to, have become so complex that they are virtually impenetrable to all but knowledgeable readers. I have watched adults in workplaces struggle to deal with the language they encounter in the texts that shape their access to recognised qualifications. Many people talk about their encounters with this language in terms of identity, power and exclusion; they relate past experiences of marginalisation in schooling and describe current feelings of fear and inadequacy. Yet established policy approaches to language are generally silent on issues of power and exclusion, focusing instead on the (presumed deficient) language and literacy skills of the individuals and groups who find themselves excluded.

This is a crucial issue of accessibility in the fundamental texts that underpin an entire sector of education. And yet it is simply not acknowledged in the official policy debates or discussions that shape decision making within Vocational Education and Training. Despite widespread criticism and local resistance (Grace 2004b, p.170), this complex and excluding language has achieved a level of acceptance as the professional language of the sector. In a process similar to that described by Dorothy

Smith (1999b, p.197), issues that are clearly visible at the local level do not translate into terms that are recognisable at the level of the institutional order.

My PhD research project (Grace 2006b), from which this paper is drawn, was firmly grounded in my own disquiet and sense of disjuncture as an educator whose professional practice has been increasingly conducted within a wider institutional context in which real people do indeed really get hurt. From the outset I had a strong sense that the issues I was struggling with had their origins in the power relations of the Vocational Education and Training sector, although I was not initially able to identify the power relations in question, nor could I explain the mechanisms by which they might have such an impact. From the starting point of my disquiet my research project used institutional ethnography to explicate what is happening when people in local workplace sites engage with the texts that shape vocational learning and assessment.

Structure of this paper

The Australian Vocational Education and Training sector provides the context for this paper. Vocational Education and Training is that sector of the Australian education system that offers post-compulsory education and training relating to occupational or work-related knowledge and skills (ANTA 2003, p.2; Knight & Nestor 2000, p.42). The sector is characterised by a complex arrangement of government departments, statutory authorities, committees and advisory councils (ANTA 2005d). The sheer scale and complexity of its governance arrangements and regulatory framework, combined with an ongoing history of policy and structural change, make this educational sector 'inherently unstable', 'overly complex' and difficult for outsiders to understand (Smith, E. & Keating 2003, p.2 & p.52). In recognition of this, and to ground this paper in the everyday experience of people working and learning in VET, I will begin this paper by presenting two brief exhibits from the interview data from my study, followed by an introduction to the principal texts that feature in these exhibits. I then outline how I used institutional ethnography to inform my study, before returning to explore the texts in question using concepts and frameworks from institutional ethnography. This analysis leads into a discussion of multiple levels of ruling texts in Vocational Education and Training, and the significance of the interpretive moment as a key moment in the exercise of power in this sector of

education. The paper draws to a close by proposing a number of implications that I see in my study, both for Vocational Education and Training and for institutional ethnography.

The following exhibits illustrate how people engaged in vocational programs experience the language of official texts, first from the perspective of a workplace educator and then from the perspective of an employee.

Exhibit 1: Fiona's experience as a vocational practitioner[1]

Fiona[2] is a highly experienced practitioner. In the following exhibit she describes a workplace program in which she was engaged by the management of an aged care facility to recognise the everyday skills of a group of employees who held no formal qualifications. Fiona's role was to assess the employees' existing skills and issue vocational qualifications on the basis of that assessment, a process that she refers to by the acronym 'RPL' (for 'Recognition of Prior Learning'). The text that provided the basis for this process was a set of national competency standards.

> 'We had one example in a nursing home. Ladies who historically have maybe left school early, brought up their families, maybe returned later to the workforce. Have had *no access* to formalised education, don't have a qualification after their name. This nursing home decided to do an RPL process for some of the core units in Certificate III in Aged Care. … I set up awareness sessions. I met them one on *one*. I had at least *three* sets of awareness sessions where I went out and didn't even *bring* the competency standards into it. I put "These are the things that we're going to be looking at" and we put their job duties of what they did and how they did it. So we turned it *around* to look at what *they* were going look at *first*, to make it accessible so that they could *relate* to it. But as soon as you brought out the standards – because they *have* to have them – it was huge. I kept going back three or four times, and it took us a *year* to actually get them *trust* us and to come to us, to build that rapport with them to say "Yes, we can support you through this, we can do this"'. (Fiona)

Exhibit 2: Christine's experience as a vocational program participant

Christine is an experienced employee who undertook a competency based Diploma program as part of her professional development. She describes how she felt as she struggled with the language of the competency standards encountered throughout the course. Despite being a confident learner who had considerable industry experience, Christine's self esteem and identity were undermined, making her doubt her ability to successfully complete her program of study.

> '… it made me feel really dumb. *Really* dumb. Because I wasn't expecting not to understand what was given to me. I think that was the biggest thing. Because I've not had any problems through schooling and all the rest of it. And to be thrown into this situation where – I think I was probably more highly educated than more than a quarter of the people who were there, and

> I was having trouble. And they had no idea either. … It did have an effect on the training, because I didn't know whether I was going to finish the Diploma, because it was just *too hard*. There was just *too* many barriers there for that. And I felt really stupid, because I couldn't finish this *vocational* qualification, and that was just beyond me. I thought "What? I can't get it". And I never really thought that there was something wrong with someone else. It was me. *I* was the problem. It's quite instilled in the whole system'. (Christine)

Introducing the texts

The principal texts that feature in the above exhibits are national competency standards. All learning and assessment programs that lead to recognised vocational qualifications are aligned to text-based competency standards that are endorsed by national government authorities. With few exceptions, these competency standards are integrated into national texts called Training Packages. Training Packages are not, as the name might suggest, resources to support training and learning. Rather, they are assessment and qualification frameworks used to assess and recognise people's skills (ANTA 2001). These assessment frameworks underpin teaching and learning through a formal requirement that each learning program address the assessment standards that relate to the qualification being sought (ANTA 2005b, p.11). There are more than eighty Training Packages currently in operation (DEST 2005b, p.20), each providing an assessment framework for an entire industry sector on a national basis. Each Training Package specifies the competency standards against which workplace performance is assessed, the procedures that must be followed in conducting assessments, and the qualifications that may be issued as particular groupings of 'units of competency' are achieved.

The language of Training Packages, and the competency standards they incorporate, has been described as 'abstract, dense and distant' (Jennings 2004, p.16), characterised by the use of passive voice, abstract language, and complex and unfamiliar terms. These grammatical forms are not commonly used in everyday speech but are widely adopted in workplace documents constructed as part of what Richard Darville (1995, p.254) called 'organizational literacy'. To draw just one example from the interview data, the Transport and Distribution Training Package unit of competency 'Shift materials safely using manual handling methods' includes the following performance standard:

> Required clearances are compared to available space and adjustments made. (NTIS n.d.)

My interview data revealed that this language does not reflect how meaning is constructed at the local level. Such language puts a distance between the reader and the text, with the result that even employees who are regarded as proficient workers are unable to recognise the everyday skills and knowledge they use on the job as being the same skills and knowledge demanded in the competency standards that relate to that job. Heidi, a practitioner with experience in the transport and distribution industry, indicated that when she uses the above standard in her own work with employees she expresses it as:

> 'If you're moving this box over there can you fit through that space? If not, what do you have to move to be able to get through?' (Heidi)

This example draws attention to the *difference* between the language of Training Packages and the vernacular of local workplaces. Heidi recasts an abstract, complex and passive performance standard into workplace vernacular by changing the words used, replacing passive with active voice, and contextualising the standard to present employees with a real and familiar workplace task that requires a specific and practical response. In contrast, the opening exhibits from Fiona and Christine reveal practitioners confronting employees with competency standards exactly as they appear in the Training Package without any editing or contextualisation. In those exhibits even experienced employees were unable to understand the competency standards; this inability, in turn, undermined their identities as competent workers and their confidence as learners.

Fiona's account clearly shows that she recognised that giving the competency standards to her participants would create significant barriers. Indeed, she initially avoided using the competency standards at all, working through a series of meetings in which she explained the assessment process using familiar and accessible workplace language. Yet she goes on to explain that she did eventually bring out the uncontextualised standards. In doing this, much of her careful preparatory work was undermined and it took many months to persuade the employees to participate in the program. Why would an experienced educator expose her participants to language that she recognises as inappropriate? Fiona's explanation that she 'brought out the standards – because they *have* to have them' references a particular reading of the Australian Quality Training Framework.

The Australian Quality Training Framework is a set of text-based compliance standards developed to 'provide the basis for a nationally consistent, high quality vocational education and training (VET) system' (ANTA 2005b, p.1). Before an organisation is authorised to conduct activities leading to vocational qualifications, it must become a Registered Training Organisation and demonstrate compliance with the provisions of the Australian Quality Training Framework (KPA Consulting 2004, p.7). All organisations that issue vocational qualifications (including publicly funded Technical and Further Education institutes, private vocational colleges, enterprises, universities and secondary schools) are subject to this regulatory text.

The Australian Quality Training Framework requires that participants in vocational programs be given clearly written information about the content and assessment standards of the program they are undertaking (ANTA 2005b, pp.8-10). The interview data from my study reveals very different interpretations of this requirement. Some practitioners argued that there is no requirement that this written information be presented in the form of uncontextualised units of competency.

> 'Where does it say that? No. It says you must give students information about what they will learn and how they will be assessed. And what the outcomes will be. … Yeah. Where does it say that? How does a student understand the context of assessment from trying to give them a Training Package … how do they know what *you're* going to do?' (Taryn)
>
> 'There is *no* requirement for them to provide a copy of the Training Package. And if they do that they should be slapped, and shot. … Because it says "clear information". And if it's not clear to the student, what it means and what it's used for, it's not clear information'. (Cheryl)

This is not, however, a universal interpretation. Like Fiona, many practitioners believe that they are *required* to issue participants with units of competency exactly as they appear in the relevant Training Package. This interpretation gives rise to practices which place Training Packages very much in the foreground, with participants being directly confronted with large and complex texts designed to establish documentary compliance with a wide range of requirements set out in the Australian Quality Training Framework. What is happening here?

Research methodology

When I initially set out to explore this question I was positioned as a practitioner who had no previous exposure to literature that would enable me to theorise or explicate

my experience. As my research progressed I was introduced to institutional ethnography. Institutional ethnography does not see power relations as 'heavy handed and unitary' (DeVault 1999, p.49), nor is the state seen as a 'monolithic structure' which is above and separate from local sites (Ng 1988, p.22). Power is pervasively structured through a 'complex of organized practices' that Dorothy Smith calls the 'ruling relations':

> A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular activities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms. It is an *extralocal* mode of ruling. ... It involves the construction of the world as texts, whether on paper or in computer, and the creation of a world in texts as a site of action. (Smith, D.E. 1987, p.3 [emphasis original])

Institutional ethnography is an extremely useful framework for explicating power relations within the Vocational Education and Training sector. The regulatory framework of this sector has been in place for little more than twenty years. Under the federal division of powers set out in the Australian constitution the authority to make laws in relation to education rests with state and territory governments rather than the national government. Until the mid 1980s, non-university training for employment fell into three broad areas; trade training and technical education, which were both subject to regulation at state and territory government level while the third area, workplace staff training, was largely unregulated (Smith, E. & Keating 2003, pp.6-13). Since 1992 a succession of formal government agreements have established a single Vocational Education and Training sector largely driven by national government agendas. These agreements did not so much create something that wasn't already happening; they created a 'complex of organised practices' to control and extend existing activities in trade training, technical education and workplace learning. This was achieved substantially through a process of generating texts that construct the Vocational Education and Training sector as a site of action. These texts include government funding agreements that define national objectives and governance arrangements (Smith, E. & Keating 2003, p.50; ANTA 2005a), legislation through which the agreed governance arrangements are given effect (DEST 2005b, pp.4-5), regulatory texts such as Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework, and a 'maze-like array' of procedural guidelines, implementation instructions, 'best practice' models, research reports, newsletters, and Internet sites (DET Qld 2003, p.1).

Using institutional ethnography my study identified the language of Training Packages as an area of experience or everyday practice, and it set out to explore or 'explicate' the institutional processes shaping that experience (Campbell & Gregor 2002, p.59; DeVault & McCoy 2001, p.755). Marie Campbell and Frances Gregor (2002, p.60) described the notion of explication as the 'analytic core' of institutional ethnography research: 'researchers begin in the everyday world, collect data about it, and proceed to explicate a problematic by going beyond what can be known in any local setting'. In explicating issues arising from the use of Training Packages in workbased learning and assessment my study involved two levels of data (Campbell & Gregor). 'Entry-level data' generated though interviews provided entry into local settings. Essential organisational details about how those local settings operate within the wider Vocational Education and Training sector only became visible through 'level-two data' generated through the examination of official texts.

Thirty-three interviews were conducted with Vocational Education and Training practitioners and participants from five Australian states and territories. Practitioner informants were selected on the basis of a diversity of experience, roles and contexts including planning and conducting learning and assessment programs, developing and reviewing Training Packages and vocational education policy, and conducting and overseeing audit processes. Participant informants had participated in learning and assessment programs aligned to Training Package qualifications. Interviews were loosely structured around a number of broad questions which explored Training Packages as 'situated in the local courses or sequences of action in which they are read and come into play' (Smith, D.E. 1999a, p.74). Finding official texts to use as 'level-two data' was a process of identifying the most relevant texts from the vast (and constantly growing) selection available.

In the early stages of my project I saw myself using my research to make a case that the language of Training Packages is dysfunctional and that it arises out of and reinforces unequal power relationships. Having framed my initial interview questions around this focus I was soon confronted with an abundance of data that strongly indicated that the language used in Training Packages makes them difficult to understand, undermines the confidence of practitioners and participants alike, and in some cases acts as a barrier to access for people wanting to pursue vocational

qualifications. As I explored these issues I began to uncover the hidden role being played by the regulatory framework of Vocational Education and Training. This was an emerging theme in my interview data, and while I was not consciously looking for it when I set out, this theme kept appearing and *would not go away*. I initially saw this as a shift in focus; but as I began to work more closely with the institutional ethnography literature and think differently about my project I realised that these emerging issues were not a distraction, they were fundamental to my project. My disquiet about the language of Training Packages provided an entry point and remained at the heart of my research project. But I came to understand that, while simply rewriting Training Packages in more accessible language might make them easier to read, it would not resolve the underlying issues. There are more fundamental questions at stake. My study made visible how the regulatory texts of Vocational Education and Training organise and reshape local practice, shifting the reference point away from local needs and aligning practice to national government agendas.

Training Packages as ruling texts that reshape local workplace practice
Workplace skills and knowledge are local, specific, contextualised and contested (Farrell 2001, 2003). In contrast, competency standards are abstracted from particular individuals and contexts (Jackson 1995, p.166), treating the workplace as little more than a 'backdrop' for the demonstration of skills (Darrah 1997, p.252). Nancy Jackson (1995, p.169) argued that competency standards are 'used to constitute the 'actual', to stand in for workplace reality, for the purposes of curriculum decision-making'. Dorothy Smith (1990b, pp.218-219) argued that texts such as standardised job descriptions and skill documents do not describe actual work processes in particular local sites; rather they specify 'determinate packages of skills' used to order social relations in a variety of different sites. From this insight, I came to see the competency standards that provide the basis for Training Packages as 'determinate packages of skills' that 'stand in for workplace reality' for an entire industry sector on a national basis. They provide the only authorised basis for assessing and recognising local skills and knowledge.

My study revealed that the use of these national texts creates positions of authority that reshape and organise local workplace practice. The language of Training Packages is such that an employee confronted with a unit of competency typically

asks 'What does that *mean*?' While each unit of competency can potentially be addressed in a variety of ways, their structure, language and tone of authoritative or imperative command (Jennings 2004, pp.9-10) convey a sense that there is clear scope for determining that some meanings will have authority while others will not. This is a process of determining what will 'count' as knowledge in a local site (Farrell 2003, p.15). Training Packages as material texts are exactly the same in every workplace 'demanding that precisely the same set of social actions count as knowledge production at every site' (Farrell 2001, p.208). Dorothy Smith (1999b, p.79) calls this property 'indefinite replicability': '[r]eplicability of identical forms of meaning that can be activated in multiple local settings'. Training Packages connect local sites across an entire industry sector, but while the material *texts* are identical in every workplace, their *meaning* in any particular site is determined by a structured process officially referred to as 'unpacking' (DET Qld 2003, p.14), which involves interpreting the abstract text and applying this interpretation to the work practices of the local site.

Individuals who are able to unpack Training Packages to achieve authorised readings have access to positions of power in relation to workplace practice. My study clearly revealed that it is the vocational practitioner, and not the employee, who has power to determine what a competency standard will be taken to mean in any local context. Power to determine what will 'count' as competent workplace practice is held by those who have authority to judge practice, rather than being held by those whose practice is subject to judgement. This power is reflected in the following exhibits, first from the perspective of a practitioner and then from the perspective of a participant.

While Libby indicates that in conducting assessments she is prepared to negotiate how the units of competency that she works with will be interpreted, she acknowledges that ultimately her position in the process gives her the authority to decide how those units will be read.

> '… it's really quite ambiguous, and I as a teacher make the assumption that this is what it means. And if the student goes too far outside that assumption that I've drawn, then I'm saying "Well, no that's not really correct because that's not the way *I'm* interpreting it'. … Well then I usually go back to them and I do try and negotiate … Sometimes I eventually say "No, you've really misinterpreted that totally" after sitting and talking to them and I realise what they've done and I say "No, you need to readdress that". And other times I might say "OK, I can see where you're coming from"'. (Libby)

The following exhibit similarly acknowledges the authority of the practitioner to determine what interpretation will be acceptable. When Kevin applied for recognition of his existing skills he disagreed with the interpretation imposed by the practitioner who was assessing his application. Despite having access to alternative interpretations that supported his own reading of the competency standard Kevin gathered the evidence demanded by the person who occupied the position of power in the process.

> 'So I then read through the performance criteria and thought "Yeah I can do this, I can do this". I then gathered together huge amount of evidence … [The assessor] and I worked through the documentation. What was amazing was, from *my* perspective, what the terminology *meant*. … What *he* was reading into the terminology was totally different to what *I* was reading into the terminology. And totally different again to what the first person I spoke to was reading into the terminology. … In the end, I went and found additional evidence that met the needs of the person who was going to issue me with the certificate. As an RTO[3] they have the responsibility to make sure that they gather the evidence that is appropriate for what they require, so I went and gathered that'. (Kevin)

This authority to determine local interpretations shifts as assessment documentation moves beyond the local level. The Australian Quality Training Framework requires practitioners to validate their learning and assessment documentation and decisions by comparison with the documentation developed and decisions made by other practitioners (ANTA 2005b, p.11). In these validation sessions each practitioner must defend their local interpretations, often in contexts that are far removed from the local site in which their own program was conducted. The records of validation, together with the original learning and assessment documentation itself, are then subject to further examination in a formal compliance audit. At this level it is the auditor who is in a position of power in determining whether the meanings achieved in the local documentation reflect what was intended in the Training Package competency standard. This brings into view the operation of the Australian Quality Training Framework.

The Australian Quality Training Framework as a ruling text that reshapes learning and assessment practice

My research revealed a number of strong resonances between the status and operation of Training Packages and the status and operation of the Australian Quality Training Framework. Where national competency standards are abstract texts that 'stand in for' local workplace practice, the national quality framework is an abstract text that 'stands in for' local learning and assessment practice. Quality systems establish

standardised practices and ensure that they are followed consistently (Jackson 2000, pp.5-6). Within a context as diverse as the Vocational Education and Training sector, it is doubtful whether there can be one approach to practice that is appropriate in every situation. Policy documents recognise this, encouraging innovation, flexibility and responsiveness (ANTA 2003; WADoT 2002, p.4). Yet to achieve compliance with the quality framework, training organisations must document and adhere to standardised procedures and systems that govern activities as diverse as: financial management; client service; administration; records management; staff recruitment; training, learning, and assessment; issuing qualifications; and marketing (ANTA 2005b). These organisational procedures and systems have direct impact on local practice (Farrell 2001, p.207), and it is through the work of practitioners that training organisations achieve and maintain compliance. Yet the Australian Quality Training Framework identifies the training organisation, not practitioners, as the entity responsible for achieving compliance (ANTA 2005b). This renders practitioners largely invisible within a text that focuses on work processes rather than on the people who enact those processes (Farrell 2000, p.27).

As with Training Package competency standards, the language of the Australian Quality Training Framework is open to wide interpretation, and each standard can be addressed in many different ways. Yet, like Training Packages, the language conveys a sense that the standards have intended meanings or that some interpretations will have authority while others will not. This is a process of determining what will 'count' as local knowledge as it is activated in specific learning and assessment practices. Many practitioners do not understand the language of the quality standards, and they seek out authorised readings to inform decisions about their own practice. In this case it is the auditor, and not the practitioner or training organisation, who has power to determine these authorised readings. Even a national review of Australian Quality Training Framework implementation noted a perception that 'compliance' means 'compliance with the auditor's opinion of what needs to be in place' (KPA Consulting 2004, p.36). As with Training Packages, authority to interpret the standards rests with those who hold power to judge practice, rather than with those whose practice is subject to judgement.

The auditor's formal power is derived from their position in the audit process and is textually defined within the Australian Quality Training Framework itself (ANTA 2005c). In some cases this formal power is reinforced through local consultancy arrangements under which training organisations engage auditors to guide them through the initial process of achieving compliance. The impact of such arrangements is illustrated in the following exhibit in which Louise describes how preparation for audit within her organisation saw 'ex-auditors' given authority over the professional judgement of learning and assessment practitioners.

> '… basically everybody went totally nutty last year trying to prepare for this audit. And they had people, ex-auditors, coming in and doing professional development sessions with us, evaluating our materials, telling us what was what. These auditors were saying things like "You *must* have everything mapped to every single performance criteria on *all* things you give to the students. On *every* assessment, you *have* to show how it maps to each. You're *not allowed* to assess anything apart from either a whole unit of competency or a whole element". … There was all these no-no's. You are *not allowed* to assess underpinning knowledge and skills. That would be invalid. You are *only* to assess competency. … But in our area, those knowledge and skills areas are huge. They're a huge part of the content. But we got told that by three ex-auditors that came in and worked with our college, every single one of them. So we were told by our management "Do what they say". We were running around like chooks without heads, changing all our unit outlines and assessment tools … But since then we have looked, some of us. And we have found ANTA[4] documents that *spell* out examples that demonstrate that you really should assess underpinning or essential knowledge and skills, and if the person doesn't pass that part of it then they can't be deemed competent, because they don't even know the reason why they're doing things. … So we've actually pulled those out and we're keeping them handy, and we're just going to do what we think you need to do, and if the auditors come along and say "Uh-uh. That's a no-no" we're just gonna say "Well, *ANTA* doesn't say so". … So when you talk about is my autonomy being *interfered* with? In a *huge* way. Absolutely *huge*'. (Louise)

Here Louise clearly expresses concern about an approach that sees authority for developing educational systems and processes being allocated to people with expertise in audit rather than education. Of particular note here is how Louise and her colleagues respond to the instruction that they are not allowed to assess knowledge that they deem essential. While these practitioners draw on their professional judgement to recognise this advice as *inappropriate* they do not believe that this will be sufficient to defend the *appropriate* local practices they have chosen to adopt, so they seek out official texts that support their interpretation. This reveals a perception that the only basis on which to challenge practices imposed through the authority of one national text is by reference to the authority of another national text.

In documenting their local learning and assessment practice to demonstrate compliance with the quality standards, practitioners report on their everyday activities

in terms that are meaningful within the national regulatory framework. This process connects local learning and assessment practice directly to national government agendas (McCoy 1998, p.407). People required to report in this way find ways of acting which will provide evidence that can be aligned to the imposed reporting requirements (Smith, D.E. 1990a, pp.93-100). Such reshaping of local practice is evident in the following exhibit. In conducting assessments, Colin would normally use familiar language to provide an oral explanation of the course content, assessment standards and assessment processes. In response to a particular reading of the Australian Quality Training Framework, Colin has replaced these vernacular oral explanations with formal written texts which provide evidence for audit. This establishes the quality standard, rather than the needs of his participants, as the reference point around which Colin's practice is designed (Farrell 2001, p.201).

> '… the AQTF perhaps unnecessarily complicates it. Well here's the instrument that we're gonna base ours on, and it's just got all this information in here … that we *have* to give the candidate regarding the assessment plan, the elements and the method of assessments, the RPL Skills Recognition process, a review and appeals process – all this sort of stuff. … But, I mean, is it necessary for them to *know* all that stuff? Assessment methods, fine. I mean, we've always explained that to people: "This is what I'm gonna look at mate, this is what I want to see from you, this is how we're going about collecting the evidence from you". I mean it goes without saying that you have to make *that* clear. But there's *clear* and there's these documents. … I could tell somebody *all* of this information within the first 10 minutes of the assessment, but it would take me an hour to walk them through that [document] and have them understand it. … there are better ways of putting it to them so that they understand. It doesn't necessarily all have to be there in black and white. … It starts to become confusing to people. This is a simple assessment – I'm seeing if you can clean and sharpen your saw, and there's 15 pages of information he's not gonna even understand to start with. … He'll say "What am I supposed to do with this?" and I'll say "Well we're supposed to give this to you by law" but it's not something that they're really that interested in, really. … usually they just have a quick look at them and go "Oh yeah" and give them back. They're not really interested. … I mean, what more are we supposed to do? We're not gonna *test* that they've read it'. (Colin)

This illustrates how compliance requirements reshape organisational accountability, with the result that an appropriate local practice has been replaced by an inappropriate practice that provides text-based evidence for audit. Providing the written text does not remove the need for an oral explanation. Indeed, Colin describes spending considerably *more* time working through these complex texts than would be required if he were free to present the information in a way that was meaningful to his participants. VET practitioners like Colin and Fiona, who would not themselves choose to confront participants with units of competency, are caught up in a new set of relations in which their local practice is restructured through their accountability to external texts (McCoy 1998).

Multiple levels of ruling texts

As ruling texts that socially organise local activities, competency based training approaches and quality management strategies each displace the authority of people at the local level, shifting the authority to decide what will count as knowledge from the local site to external forces (Campbell 1998; Farrell 2001; Jackson 1995). The regulatory framework of the Vocational Education and Training sector is a textually based system in which Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework are 'intimately intertwined', operating in 'a symbiotic relationship' (Schofield & McDonald 2004, p.8). By overlaying a national competency system with a national quality framework ruling is achieved through layers of texts which shift authority from local sites.

While these texts are those most visible in local sites, they operate within a wider institutional context which is itself constructed through multiple levels of official texts including policy statements, funding agreements, and legislation. While national reports and policy statements hold no formal regulatory authority, they assert government interests and positions, establish the link between vocational education policy and national economic and labour market policies, and define underlying conceptual and policy agendas including the establishment of national consistency as a primary policy objective for the Vocational Education and Training sector (ANTA 2003; DEST 2005b). Since the late 1980s the goal of national consistency has been repeatedly affirmed with little or no discussion about the extent to which it is achievable, desirable or even what it might look like. In 2005 national, state and territory governments reaffirmed a commitment to 'national consistency without losing the capacity for local diversity', and at the same time they proposed a national review of Australian Quality Training Framework audits to identify 'any areas where States are applying the standards inconsistently' (DEST 2005a, p.1 & p.13). Local diversity, it would seem, is both acceptable and desirable, but inconsistency is neither. Contradictory policy commitments and priorities such as these are expressed without any discussion of the apparent tensions within and between them. If a capacity for local diversity is to be maintained, then what form will the much sought after national consistency take? When does acceptable local diversity become unacceptable inconsistency?

Institutional ethnography argues that ruling in contemporary societies is achieved through objectified forms of knowledge represented in texts that coordinate local activities and provide for organisational action (McCoy 1998, pp.395-396; Ng 1988, p.22). In 20th century capitalist societies text mediated social organisation has become ubiquitous as the 'technology of ruling' (Campbell 2003, p.16; Smith, D.E. 1990b, pp.209-224). My study reveals that ruling in VET is achieved through multiple levels of texts that act individually and together to organise local practice towards policy goals defined by national government agendas. Even before the introduction of Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework, Nancy Jackson had identified the regulatory potential of Australian vocational education policies that were establishing 'an elaborate, vertically integrated system of labour market management' (Jackson 1993, p.54). A succession of texts subsequently introduced has established an even more elaborate system that constructs knowledge in a textual mode and establishes objectified textual processes to replace judgements and decisions that would once have been based on subjective knowledge, expertise and prudent practice (Smith, D.E. 1990b, p.214).

The power of the interpretive moment

Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework exist in material form as accounts of practice that transcend local sites. Dorothy Smith (1990b, pp.221-224) draws attention to the 'interpretive moment' in which a competent reader activates a text in a particular local setting. Interpretive practices are part of the sequence of social action that occurs as a text is activated. Ruling in the Vocational Education and Training sector is achieved through the sequences of social actions that occur as Training Packages and the Australian Quality Training Framework are interpreted and activated in local sites. As these texts are 'unpacked' they 'suture' local practice to national policy agendas (Smith, D.E. 1999a, p.74).

These national texts are written in language that is capable of being interpreted in many different ways. Interview data from my study reveals that when the texts are read broadly, and with reference to the local context in which they are being activated, these texts are capable of supporting practices that are responsive to local needs.

However, when read narrowly, and without reference to local sites, these same texts establish the regulatory requirements themselves as the primary reference point.

The *institutional language* of these texts is such that those whose practice is subject to judgement seek advice in determining authorised readings. The *regulatory power* of the texts is such that those who are recognised as having authority to provide this advice are those who occupy the positions of power defined within the text. The authority of the practitioner to interpret Training Package standards is entrenched and widely accepted; participants seek out and comply with these interpretations. The authority of the Australian Quality Training Framework auditor is similarly well established, with some practitioners and training organisations readily turning to auditors seeking interpretations to guide decisions about their own practice.

A similar process is underway at the policy development and system management level in Vocational Education and Training. In the pursuit of national consistency a review of Australian Quality Training Framework implementation proposed a range of strategies that would allow national government authorities to establish interpretational precedents to guide state and territory government authorities in their management of regulatory texts (KPA Consulting 2004, pp.8-9 & pp.44-49). Rather than proposing changes to the regulatory texts themselves, national government has instead proposed strategies that would enable it to exercise control over the interpretive moment as activated by state and territory government authorities through their auditors.

My study revealed that the interpretive moment is a key point in the exercise of power at multiple levels within the text-based Vocational Education and Training sector. By asserting authority over the interpretive moment, those who occupy the positions of power established in national texts such as Training Packages, the Australian Quality Training Framework and national governance texts operate from positions of strength relative to those whose practice is subject to judgement. When workplace employees turn to practitioners asking what competency standards 'mean', and when practitioners turn to auditors asking what quality standards 'mean', they lose their agency in the interpretive moment and surrender their authority over their own practice.

Gary Kinsman (1997, p.235) argued that '[h]egemony is always actively accomplished, never self-securing. It must be continuously struggled for, won, and maintained. It is never total, never exclusive, and there are always possibilities for subversion and transformation'. If practitioners are to subvert and transform the establishment of hegemony within Vocational Education and Training, assert authority over their own practice and reclaim the agency they have lost, they need to recognise and resist government attempts to achieve national consistency through greater control over the interpretive moment. Practitioners also need to challenge the uncritical acceptance of an institutional language form that is *so* complex that it reinforces the authority of those who occupy positions of power and denies access to many who have a legitimate interest in the process but who are not knowledgeable readers of official texts.

Implications of this study

I view my study as contributing to the wider institutional ethnography project of conducting a range of studies in different contexts to piece together representations and analyses of institutional processes from different positions (Smith, D.E. 1999a, p.79). I believe my project has implications for the Vocational Education and Training sector and also for institutional ethnography.

Institutional ethnography allowed me to use my disquiet about the language of Training Packages as a starting point from which to explicate ruling in Vocational Education and Training. My study brought into view fundamental questions about how arrangements entered into at government level establish a regulatory framework which organises local practice, connects that practice to government policy agendas, and shifts authority from those who enact practice to those who have power to judge that practice. These are the power relationships that I could *sense* as a practitioner, but it was only through undertaking this study that they became visible.

I have sought to develop what Dorothy Smith (1993, p.188) described as a map: 'No map tells people how to move, but only how here and there are related on the ground should they want to get from one to the other. This kind of ordinary telling about the world we do for each other all the time'. My purpose is not to tell my colleagues in

Vocational Education and Training what to change and how to change it. I am simply seeking to show how local practice is directly connected to social processes that are not visible from local sites. Working as an 'insider' and exploring 'how things work' (Smith, D.E. 1990a, p.204), my study presents a different way of looking at the Vocational Education and Training sector. It brings into view relationships and connections that were not previously visible, and reveals that when research seeks to produce knowledge 'for' practitioners and participants, rather than 'of' them (DeVault 1999, p.47; Smith, D.E. 1987, p.153) the knowledge produced disrupts comfortable assumptions about the capacity of the national regulatory framework to ensure good learning and assessment practice.

From the outset, my research project was firmly grounded in concerns and disquiet arising in my own practice, and my belief that the issues I was struggling with had their origins in the hidden power relations within which I worked. My explicit intent was to use my research to make these power relations visible and to produce a resource that would encourage wider debate and resistance. Through a series of published papers I have challenged the official silence about the language of Training Packages and exposed aspects of ruling in Vocational Education and Training (Grace 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005a, 2005b, 2006a). This was an integral part of my original objective, and I will continue to use data from my study to pursue it. Like Marjorie DeVault (1999, p.17), I have learned that I can use my skills and knowledge to 'stir up trouble' and that 'stirring up trouble felt like a very good thing to do'. The enthusiastic response that my study and the published papers arising from it have received from people at all levels of Vocational Education and Training suggests that many of my colleagues are also ready to start stirring up trouble by challenging dysfunctional aspects of the sector and shifting the focus back onto local needs rather than national agendas.

Institutional ethnography allowed me to construct the issues of language and power in Vocational Education and Training in a way that is powerful for practitioners and participants and can be generalised to other institutional contexts. Yet as a graduate student I did not plan my research as an institutional ethnography study from its initial conception. I embarked on my research project as a practitioner with an issue to explore, seeking out a theoretical framework with which to explore it. It was not until

the end of my first year of full-time study that I was introduced to institutional ethnography through three of Dorothy Smith's works (1987, 1990b, 1999b). My initial response combined frustration and excitement. Frustration because it is difficult to grasp the theory and method of institutional ethnography through reading Dorothy Smith's writing, which has been described as 'dense' (Campbell 2003; DeVault 1999, p.11). Excitement because here at last was an approach to research that would allow me to use my disquiet as a starting point, to explore power relations that I sensed existed but which were not visible, and to produce a report that would encourage debate and support resistance. Once I began reading Dorothy Smith's work I could not put it aside until I had found my way in.

My entry into institutional ethnography was supported by a series of fortuitous events. Working as an off-campus student located on the opposite side of the Australian continent to my supervisor and faculty, I took up an opportunity to present at a postgraduate research conference hosted by a university in my home city (Grace 2004c). My paper represented my first attempt to reframe my research questions using my early understanding of institutional ethnography. Through discussions with other postgraduate researchers at the conference I was not only referred to Marie Campbell and Ann Manicom's (1995) edited collection of institutional ethnography essays, I was also alerted to an imminent visit by Dorothy Smith as keynote speaker at another local university conference. I attended, and not only did the keynote presentation address some emerging questions I had about my research, I also had the valuable opportunity to speak with Dorothy Smith during the conference. Our brief conversations affirmed for me that institutional ethnography had much to offer as the conceptual framework for my study.

Working through the references listed in Marie Campbell and Ann Manicom's (1995) collection introduced me to a body of literature written by institutional ethnographers who had conducted a range of studies in a variety of contexts, including Nancy Jackson's (1995) paper on the social organisation of knowledge in competency based vocational training. I no longer felt that I was working alone; in addition to Dorothy Smith's own works I now had access to a body of work *about* institutional ethnography, and reports *from* institutional ethnography studies. In moving between this literature and Dorothy Smith's own writing I became more confident in my

understanding of institutional ethnography and began to see how I could use this approach in my own study.

Reflecting on my experience as a beginning institutional ethnographer I believe there are implications for the literature of the field. Institutional ethnography is 'an emergent mode of inquiry' (Campbell & Gregor 2002, p.55), that is 'intended to provide, on a day-to-day basis, the scientific ground for political action' (Smith, G. 1995, p.32). Dorothy Smith stated that:

> My project is a sociology capable of expanding anyone's access to the workings of the world they live and act in. Imagine it as making visible to us the social relations that organize our lives, that are present in our everyday worlds, but aren't fully apparent in them. Sociologists might be producing for people something like a map that would let us see how what we do is hooked into social processes beyond our view. (Smith, D.E. 1993, p.188)

I have used institutional ethnography to gain access to the workings of the 'world' of Vocational Education and Training in which I work. This is a world where this approach to research is extremely powerful but not yet widely used. I acknowledge that the technical work involved in the debates and literature that shape and inform this, and any other, approach to research 'cannot be done in language that is accessible to everyone' (Smith, D.E. 1999a, p.67). Yet I would argue that if practitioner activists in other 'worlds' or fields of practice where institutional ethnography is not yet established are to have access to this approach as a tool for their own research, then it is essential that the literature on institutional ethnography continue to include published accounts of studies written in a form that is 'ordinarily accessible and usable' (Smith, D.E. 1999b, p.95). Having access to such accounts was a significant factor facilitating my own entry into institutional ethnography.

A key part of my own goal in publishing from my PhD research is to encourage other researchers, particularly those working in Vocational Education and Training, to take up and use the tools of institutional ethnography. In doing this I have sought to contribute to the literature by providing one more account of a study that has used institutional ethnography in a way that is powerful, useful and accessible.

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[1] Complex language, jargon and acronyms have so permeated Vocational Education and Training that it is almost impossible to speak or write about the sector without resorting to the use of such language. Even the identity terms used for people learning and working in vocational programs are problematic. There is no single term that expresses a universally accepted professional identity for the estimated 390,000 people who work in vocational education programs (Smith, E. & Keating 2003, p.230). 'Teacher' and 'trainer' are two widely used professional identity terms, but my study argues that strong historical divisions exist between these various professional identities. Similarly, employees engaged in learning or assessment may be referred to in official texts as 'learners', 'trainees' or 'students', and yet few employees identify with such terms which carry connotations of inexperience, youth and entry level training that 'may not be compatible with being regarded as a competent worker' (Boud & Solomon 2003, p.326). Throughout my study I adopted the term 'practitioners' to refer to members of the Vocational Education and Training workforce and 'participants' to refer to people engaged in a program of learning or assessment. These terms are not entirely unproblematic, but they are both in use and I hope both are as yet free from the negative associations that have become attached to the alternatives currently available.

[2] All informants are identified by pseudonyms.

[3] RTO is the acronym for Registered Training Organisation, an organisation that has demonstrated compliance with the Australian Quality Training Framework and is authorised to issue recognised vocational qualifications.

[4] ANTA was the Australian National Training Authority, an Australian Government statutory authority that from 1992 to 2005 was empowered to advise on policy issues and to administer the Vocational Education and Training sector and national government funding (Smith, E. & Keating 2003, p.32). In a restructure of governance arrangements in 2005 ANTA was abolished and its functions transferred to the national Department of Education, Science and Training

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