

# Engaging VET Practitioners Forums

## VET professionals making good judgements<sup>1</sup>

*A think piece to stimulate discussion at the Reframing the Future Forums, August 2005*

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Judgement has become a common leitmotiv in popular culture (Beckett & Hager, 2000; Smith, 1999). The need to make a 'judgement call' is often acknowledged with a sense of pride, almost as an affirmation of the worth of the speaker, an antidote to the alienation of the individual in the post-modern world (Sloop 1998). Making a 'judgement call' implies that one is being active, committed, accountable, powerful, and ethical, like a courtroom judge. McDaniel and Sloop insist that the re-emergence of judgement as a 'vital cultural topic' in part reflects the fact that the judgement process is most valued as a human activity *when* it is difficult, when we cannot be sure which voice is right: *as when an umpire must call a strike or a ball when only doubt is in his mind* (McDaniel & Sloop, 1998).

What then of the experience of VET educators in making assessment judgements in the post-curriculum age? Do they experience assessment judgements as autonomous and professionally empowering events? How do we prepare educators to make good judgements? What sort of professional practices sustain wise judgements?

For VET educators, the early years of the training reform agenda generated a confusing mythology about the act of making an assessment judgement. This was the mistaken belief that assessment criteria could fully and accurately describe performance so that a skilled practitioner, with limited training, could easily make an assessment decision. The mythology promised that competency-based assessment would be a case of 'tick and flick'; the reality was that it required a high degree of '...interpretation and judgement' (Bull, 1985). Recent developments such as the *High Level Review of Training Packages* have identified the need to debunk the mythology. However, over the last ten years, it has had a powerful effect on perceptions of VET work, contributing to the uncertainty about the professional status of VET practice.

*But we have to make judgements...*

My own interest in this problem grew as I worked with my colleagues to implement competency-based assessment in our courses. I noticed that my colleagues constantly raised judgement as an issue. For example Helena, Microbiology educator extraordinaire, talking to me about her first attempts at designing competency based assessment of students' bacterial cultures, cried out in frustration, '*...but we have to make judgements!*' As I began formal research into this area in 1996, a colleague asked about my work. Upon being told that I was interested in the role of judgement in competency based assessment, this she became puzzled and asked what judgement had to do with competency based education. Surely, she argued the point of competency based education was that you did not use judgement! This was an interesting perspective and one that was argued in the academic literature at the time. A number of the early writers on CBT in Australia identified assessment judgement as a critical

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issue for educators (Bailey, 1995; Mulcahy, 1996; Robinson, 1993). Some exhorted course developers to do better and get those assessment criteria right (Watson, 1993). Others identified that a great many judgements are involved in the design and delivery of all assessment techniques including competency based assessment (Bailey, 1995).

My research into how VET educators make assessment decisions continued into the early 2000s. It led me to understand the nature of the judgements that VET educators make and to see that these are central to professional VET practice and the foundation for quality learning in the VET system. Not surprisingly, I discovered that an understanding of VET assessment judgements lay at the heart of other vexed issues in VET practice such as the question of consistency in assessment practice. However this short discussion cannot address all of these. For the remainder of this paper I will focus on the relationship between our understanding of how VET educators make assessment judgements and our perceptions of VET professionalism.

### *Is VET practice a profession?*

The community has long regarded university and school teaching as professions in Australia. Elsewhere in the world teaching in institutions similar to VET institutes is also regarded as professional work. For example in the United States community college educators are often referred as *professor*. However the status of Australian VET educators has long been problematic. How can we know what it means to be a professional and whether or not VET teaching is a profession?

In his book *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, Michael Eraut explores the vexed ideologies of professionalism; the endless debates about which occupations are or are not professions, who's in and who's out. He claims that most discussion on professionalism is highly influenced by conventional understandings of the characteristics of 'high-status professions' such as medicine and law. These are characteristics such as: the existence of a professional knowledge base; some form of formal professional preparation at university level; entry through a qualifying examination, membership of a professional institute or association; adherence to a professional code of practice and the idea that the *professional* is an autonomous worker, self-employed or a partner in a small practice. Eraut shows us that in the twenty-first century many of these so-called characteristics of professions are illusory. For example these days most doctors and lawyers are employees and any professional code of practice has to take that circumstance into account.

Eraut argues persuasively that the nub of professional practice is not so much the formal knowledge as the ability to make a professional judgement. Respect for professionals arises from our admiration for skilful decisions made in challenging circumstances. Think *ER* any Thursday night. Eraut emphasises that professionals learn how to make professional judgements on the job. Their initial professional education is merely an important preparation for further work-based learning, especially learning from distinct challenging sets of circumstances or *case-based* learning. All professionals make sound judgements based on their experience of similar situations or cases just as judges follow precedent. As an individual professional's experience grows so does their ability to make increasingly complex judgements.

Schön like Eraut has written extensively on professional education (*The Reflective Practitioner* and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*). Schön also maintains that *professional judgements* are made when the going gets tough. Schön refers to professionals as those who solve problems encountered in the '...indeterminate, swampy grounds of practice'. Many writers on professional judgement echo Schön's view that *professionalism* is displayed in '...in unique, uncertain and conflicted, situations of practice'. In the same way, long time Australian Football League Chair, Ross Oakley, has commented that 'good judgement comes from experience, experience comes from poor judgement.'

For my doctoral research, conducted in 1999 and 2000, I interviewed VET educators about their experience of assessment judgements. They worked on and off campus in public RTOs, group training companies and enterprise-based RTOs. They worked with national curriculum or Training Packages in automotive, hair and beauty, aged care, veterinary nursing, chemical plant operation, laboratory technology and business administration.

What I found of course was that VET educators were out there wading warily but skilfully through the swamp of professional practice. Assessment judgements are not always simple. It is clear that individual educators and teams make judgements within a personal and an historical context and that a range of problems needs to be solved during the assessment process. The experience is 'thick'. I concluded that the assessment judgements made by VET educators are characterised by: preparedness, collegiality, working to rules, seriousness of purpose, dealing with predicaments and obligations and pragmatism.

*Preparedness* refers not only to the preparations made before making an assessment but also to the formal and informal preparation of the assessor over time. Several educators I interviewed spoke of the 'set of questions' they had in their minds when assessing learners' practical skills. Such assessments often took place during the 'hot action' on the factory floor and depended on these almost intuitive lists built up over many years:

If I haven't done it for a while I'll have to get a little mental checklist going... but generally if you start off by asking them what sort of problems they have with X then it comes back to you...but if I haven't assessed a person on the operation of a boiler then I have to develop a checklist for that because it's a rare event (Tim, chemical plant assessor)

I used the term *collegiality* to refer to the fact that every educator I interviewed regarded assessment as a social process. In particular, they mentioned the importance of their relationships with colleagues in developing their sense of the standards to which they were assessing. This idea of the real standard defined through practice as opposed to the documented curriculum or Training Package standard is an important concept in understanding how VET professionals work:

The syllabus is written in a standard where it gives you a set standard that the student must reach...and it says they must ...dismantle, prepare a chart, put the thing back together. It must run without noises, without an oil leak...so there's a set standard, but of course everyone's idea of that standard varies up and down. So it does leave itself open to the interpretation of the individual (Bruce, Automotive Studies Teacher, Lawson Institute).

By *working to rules* I mean the peculiarly complex layers of regulation and institutionalised practice which surround VET practice. VET educators have to deal with the requirements of their own employers and clients as well as Training Package specifications. One intriguing example I encountered was the work of an automotive industry assessor who assessed in various workplaces on behalf of a group training company:

I'm doing two people on the same day. One at a taxi organisation, one at a Porsche dealership. Now the quality, the standard, in the taxi place is get the bloody thing out, it's a money making machine. I don't care just as long as it looks yellow, get it out there, all right. The Porsche, totally different, isn't it? Right! It's got to be this mirror finish, the exact same colour, and the customer's got to be happy because the car's worth \$100,000 (Kevin, Automotive Industry Assessor)

My concept of *seriousness of purpose* refers to the surprising degree to which ethics and values matter to VET educators. All of my informants mentioned values in some context. In

assessing learners they were concerned with unspecified criteria representing larger 'goods' such as the good of the individual learner, the good of organisations, the good of industry and the common good. For example, Tim, the chemical industry assessor, spoke of the influence the Longford disaster had on his assessment work:

...it's not being bloody minded or something like that, it's maybe around safety...they're out of touch with the Oc Health and Safety Act and they know a little bit of it so to feel more comfortable I'll give them the whole module to do (Tim).

As with other professionals, experienced VET educators weave their way through a maze of predicaments and obligations when they are making assessment judgements. I asked participants to tell me about times when it had been difficult to make an assessment decision about a learner's level of competence and the stories poured out. The difficulties included ethical, political and personal predicaments, lack of resources and social tensions. Interestingly there is usually a significant team influence as groups of educators in staffrooms and offices spend time in conversations about their work, resolving conflicts and working through issues. The VET educators I interviewed often revealed a sense of pragmatism and in some cases expediency in their stories. Such *pragmatism* can be a powerful and moral component of professional judgement, representing the desire to do the best one can in difficult circumstances.

This takes us back to the theorists. Eraut and Schön maintain that the development of professional knowledge through experience is essentially a private experience. However professions support their members to turn their private knowledge into shared public knowledge through shared reflection with colleagues, at conferences and in publications. The success of initiatives such as Reframing the Future and Learnscope is no doubt due to the opportunity these provide for shared reflection on practice.

Based on their ability to make professional judgements, it is clear that VET educators undertake professional work. Whether or not they are part of a profession, however, is another question. A profession exists where members have the time and space needed to engage in professional conversations, to share reflections and turn private experiences into public knowledge. As a system we need to ensure that VET educators have the time and space they need. This will support the development of the VET profession and ensure that the system benefits from the knowledge developed by individual VET practitioners.

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