

## **Where the boys are**

**Carmel Brown**

**Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE at Malmsbury Juvenile Justice Centre,  
Victoria, Australia**

The experience of vocational education and training (VET) with young men at the Malmsbury Juvenile Justice centre campus of Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE is worth a look, probably at any time. At this conference I wish to focus on it because it is a heightened instance of what a lot of people are noticing in TAFEs, schools, community employment programs and adult community education, and that, is that education and training for a lot of boys is not doing what is meant to. Vallenge (2001) cites some of this in a punchy piece linking crime rate, suicide rates in Australia of young men, the appeal to them of social disconnection and lack of appeal of education. To make the point, he cites the return of the seventies' school boys' retention rate in Victoria (68.5%). What are we to make of this?

I concur that with the concerns; they are valid and vital. However, I think that it is not peculiar to males and that looking at the problems and the successes of boys in VET is significant for what it reveals about priorities of action for the whole industry. I propose that there are two fields of priorities. Firstly, learning conditions and dynamics; secondly the connection between education and training and psychosocial currents. What is that connection? My response is influenced by social theory that is not about VET or even crime. It is about identifying tensions in personal and social formation (in particular Benjamin 1988, also Giddens 1991).

Contemporary dilemmas in VET and in its provision in Corrections are I believe, hugely and intimately bound up with social impulses that intersect in the lives of each of us. These

impulses are to do with mobility, security and risk, performance, intensity and a (sometimes-skewed) version of choice or making your own life. In the middle of this, young people exhibit various ways of coping and creating – or not. There is more of an onus on them to manage.

If education and training plans and practices ignore the way young people themselves are interpreting and living in the social world, then problems like what to do with boys will get shifted and resurface. We accept dislocation between youth and education and training and work around the edges, or we take stock of what the dilemmas teach us and start imagining how else education could be. The second option, or rather its need, can be illustrated through reviewing learning dynamics. To assist this, I'll draw on my current workplace - Bendigo Regional Institute of TAFE (BRIT) at the Malmsbury Juvenile Justice Centre (MJJC).

### **Some characteristics of learners in the Juvenile Justice Centre**

The median of highest year level of secondary schooling attempted in the group of seventy-four young offenders is Year 9. There is however, is a range of skills and abilities in these seventeen to twenty-one year olds that does not show itself on measures of reading and writing or numeracy. Learners can be clever and curious; they can scam and scheme, and there is a strong entrepreneurial streak as we would expect. The oral literacy capacities of some of these young men are highly developed; some individuals can articulate and seek out future education/employment interests; others can review learning progress. They can instruct each other and the staff! As you would predict, it's does not all blend harmoniously.

At this particular TAFE campus, involvement in programs can be spasmodic, and yes there are drug issues in the lives of participants. When they attend, there can be conflicts; some individuals get stroppy, aggressive and bored; and they sometimes just come to TAFE to

check out what happened in  $x$  unit last night or to do business – in groups. So it's a mixed scene.

Ashley and Daniel are two people of that scene. I'll like to draw on their experience to make some interpretive points and then look at some implications for education.

### **Ashley**

Ashley, now released was one of the hyperactive learners. On the go... roaming around... quick to anger, could string insults together. When Ashley entered a room he would immediately pick up something; he couldn't be still. Ashley left school during year 9. At eighteen he was a parent to a 5 month old.

He always appeared at TAFE – Ashley roamed everywhere. He dabbled in outdoor recreation, joined in on a parenting workshop and enrolled in some carpentry. But the marker in his TAFE history was when he started making a wooden clock.

To do the job, Ashley had to concentrate. He had to use the electric saw... he had to measure and mark wood. He did this alongside the teacher. The conversation was scant... it tended to be on the topic... punctuated by rebukes and conditions to be met. Gradually there was a comfortableness of talk and an established routine. The workshop space is large; the group is small. The radio was always playing and there were regular breaks for a smoke if need be. The whole process appeared to still him.

It wasn't just the clock – Ashley liked physical activity available in TAFE *Outdoor Recreation*. An interesting thing is that he was a hit with primary school children when they visited for swim sessions.

OK Ashley could be one of the sufferers of attention disorder; however, any description in those terms is not the whole story, for clearly he could be other.

### **What can we glean from Ashley's experience?**

Firstly he was in a location where movement was restricted. Yet young people (especially) live with a requirement – almost – to be on the move – to be seen to be opening opportunities, to be in the places that are about movement, literally and metaphorically. This social impulse is a problem in a detention centre! (Especially one that is committed to maintaining connections to mainstream life through a leave and external visit system).

Secondly, for Ashley there was a certain appeal of work. Both the clock and the swimming demonstrate that he was using his capacities, and being productive. This matters.

Thirdly, I tend to think there was relief for him in being able to be settled (however momentary) – to not be experiencing intensity. This is in contrast to much of the rest of his daily experience. Intensity is a dynamic of relationships, leisure, and surroundings (Giddens 1992, McDonald 1999). It could also be an element in risk taking associated with crime and substance abuse. It certainly appears to be an aspect of close living in detention.

A fourth factor that seemed to assist was that Ashley had a visible place and it was among peers. They instructed each other in the workroom. The peer dynamic has mixed consequences. It operates in ganging up or ostracising.

Fifthly, for Ashley the connection with the teacher was vital. An adult – male – who set boundaries, and eased in style one a degree of mutual security was established (cause it was both – teachers too are more circumspect now). The relationship to authority that is traditionally associated with, say, apprentices and master, was not quite the story here. There

were elements of that, but clearly more dependence on the grounds of daily liaison rather than the respect for position itself. In this situation Ashley had the security of routine and a degree of choice with boundaries.

There also appeared to be a gender factor that worked for him – and the teacher – in the workshop. Female staff were however, exposed to insult from him, when he was not being attended to on his own terms and especially when he was with peers. Here he could become infantile.

Finally, the learning environment and conditions worked for Ashley – the music, the freedom to go outside, and a small yet interconnected group of learners, working at their own pace.

## **Daniel**

Daniel's situation is somewhat different. At the time of writing he is not participating in TAFE with any regularity. He did complete a *Peer Education* workshop and has spasmodic involvement in *General Education* and *Hospitality*.

When I did an educational assessment with Daniel he was extremely fluent and ready to identify learning conditions – much more so than his attempted year 9 schooling may suggest. Daniel was advised by the school to leave in that year, and the feeling was mutual. In his words there had been fights. He said – *I found it hard to adjust.... To being talked to like a kid. He was older in his mind than a lot of the others.* What did he mean?

Daniel had left home in year 7 because he couldn't stand the way his stepfather treated his mother. He had subsequently left school and then returned but then left again. Daniel's post-compulsory attempt at education was through a TAFE return to study course. He was in a class with a lot of older people; he *didn't like the speed – it was too slow.*

### **What are some of the general aspects in this instance?**

Firstly, even in year 7, leaving school and jeopardising success, Daniel had recognised the capacity in himself to act. It was a hitting out that was associated with a judgement of human worth regardless of the importance of school or future employment. It was regardless of the institutional expectations that used to internalise authority. Leaving home was a removal of a situation that was too much to bear. He was producing his own home – inside himself, becoming autonomous as social life now recommends. How can education mobilise that enormous but fragile capacity?

Secondly Daniel is a quick thinker and is able to verbally express intelligence. He knows he is able. Still interested in going back to have ago at VCE – he looks to that as a way of getting out of his predicament. He is looking for a path – to not being excluded. VCE has that kudos. Meanwhile drug use has become established in his life.

Thirdly, the information presented by Daniel about his life experience, including his crime isn't called for in the assessments. Increasingly however, young men expect to be asked, or are ready to reveal – with mixed consequences.

### **What are the implications for education and training?**

Learning about myself and my relationships to the world through internalisation of roles (family, work and school) is no longer a pertinent framework to understand education and to teach. The student is not only a student. He may be student-at-risk, client, offender, employee, male....Whoever he is the issue - for social life is a constant reproduction of identity where there is much more of an onus on each of us to make ourselves (Giddens 1991, McDonald 1999).

Self-management fostered by case management is one way through. We establish options; make strategic choices, obtain networks that assist the capacity for choice and management of risk. That much is in keeping with the cultivation of an entrepreneurial self; it also calls for a certain amount of individual strength, or set-ups to support the vulnerable – this the expansion of schemes like the *Work for the Dole* in Australia.

But strategic management is not a sufficient way to live life, work or run education and training. It relies on a predictable level of rationality and a network (at last) of enabling people and resources. It does not recognise the various, precarious and conflicting ways young people are attempting, succeeding and struggling to learn and live. That's where we have to look.

What does this mean for VET – for boys? There are some arenas of action that leap out of these examples. I propose that attention to learning conditions and styles is one priority.

- Intensity is 'in', and learning in institutions has to almost compete with it. So we do allow for music; we do use the visual; we also allow for those who need respite from stimulus including the student who says: *I can't work in this room it's too noisy.*
- In an uncertain world, trust and risk are everyday calls – Daniel's home life reminds us. Given this, some young men need the security of direction - compensating for earlier loss of trust and connected autonomy. Others need trust that comes with recognition of autonomy (Benjamin 1985). Teachers have to be on their toes – to know when to direct and when to let apparent choice be the governing principle.

- Ashley moves; mobility matters. We need more learning experiences that are not restrictive. When social inequality or the everyday experience of constraint interferes with a social pull towards movement, it is sometimes the custodians (teachers) who bear the brunt of the consequences. So we have to allow for movement but we also have to assist the capacity to feel at home -to be grounded.
- There are physical learners and doers. There is also the young man who cannot read but who is musically adept, the maths sequential learner, the socially intelligent group learner and all of what Gardner says (1983). Young men at Malmsbury appreciate being recognised for being clever. It follows that what is provided in courses and in teaching methods has to engage with the range of intelligences and experiences. We can get curious about why a group gets so engrossed in an electronics workshop. We can also decide to capitalise on client strengths to provide small business. For us at BRIT – Malmsbury, provision includes some bold programs such as *Peer Education* and *Parenting*.
- As teachers we have to continue to assist young men to articulate, and yet be mindful of exposure. McDonald (1999) refers to a psychologisation of learning – the increasing use of declarations of feelings and opinions. Even in VET this is more evident. For some young men this kind of exposure is a pressure. They may remain hidden. There are already some highly skilled oral literates out there. VET can enhance the flow of conversation and use it to develop knowledge and know-how.

There is much to do. Education and training - in a formal sense and among mass populations is still young. In Corrections it is even younger. We could consider this to be a period of implementation!

## **Bibliography**

Benjamin, J. 1988, The Bonds of Love, Virago Press, London

Gardner, H. c1983, Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Basic Books, New York

Giddens, A. 1991, Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age, Polity Press, Cambridge

Giddens, A. 1992, Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California

McDonald, K. 1999, Struggles for Subjectivity Identity, Action and Youth Experience, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge

Vallence, K. 'Training culture fails males' in Campus Review, 15: August 8-14, 2001