



**Critical spirit manifestations in TAFE teachers
and their work**

by

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Abstract

This thesis reports on research conducted with Technical and Further Education (TAFE) teachers from Queensland and Western Australia. The research is located at the intersection where teachers' identities met the discourse of new vocationalism. Scholars have highlighted the tensions that this discourse has produced in the relationships between TAFE and its teachers, and noted that TAFE teachers are pressured to change their subjectivities to reflect themselves more effectively as workers in an educational market focused on economic imperatives. This is often in contrast to these teachers' personal notions of themselves as liberal educators, with a focus on lifelong learning, personal transformation, collaborative relationships and social responsibility. This research was driven by the possibility that the concept of 'critical spirit' might provide a means for TAFE teachers to stand their ground in relation to the continued reshaping of the TAFE teacher terrain produced by the adoption of the new vocational discourse.

This interpretative research was conceptualised by synthesising sociocultural perspectives of discourse as a reality building tool (Gee, 2005) with notions of critical thinker dispositions referred to as critical spirit (Siegel, 1988; Oxman-Michelli, 1992). The elements of critical spirit: openmindedness, independence of mind, wholeheartedness, intellectual responsibility and respect for others (Oxman-Michelli, 1992) were used as central components to the development of a coding framework for the explication of critical spirit from TAFE teacher artefacts and in positioning critical spirit as a discourse. An examination of 12 TAFE teacher case narrative artefacts revealed that elements of critical spirit were evident. Subsequent participant

credibility checks and semi-structured interviews provided diverse data related to teacher embodiment of a critical spirit in relation to the building of certain teacher identities. In some cases participants expressed that their identities were bolstered by engaging in a critical spirit discourse, others cautioned its public embodiment, suggesting that deploying critical spirit made them more visible to surveillance and control. The major finding of this research was that an explicit engagement with a critical spirit discourse was of value to these TAFE teachers. Furthermore, this critical spirit discourse was seen to perform the work of a borderland discourse (Gee, 2005; Alsup, 2006). It afforded a means to traverse the terrain “between disparate personal and professional subjectivities” (Alsup, 2006, p. 5).

The research also uncovered other discourses pertinent to participant artefacts. These were identified as a *test of fortitude* discourse and a *community of support* discourse. It was postulated that these would extend the critical spirit discourse by adding to Oxman-Michelli’s (1992) five elements of critical spirit. The findings suggested little evidence to support this position.

The significance of this research was in: (a) the production of a methodological construct for explicating particular notions of critical spirit; (b) its contribution to furthering understandings of the professional lives of TAFE teachers and their work world; and (c) the value that a critical spirit discourse had in strengthening these TAFE teachers’ notions of themselves and their effectiveness. Its contribution to substantial knowledge was in its expansion of our understanding of teacher identities within the Vocational Education and Training sector in Australia.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated with love and affection to my loving mother Margaret Edith Tyler (*née* Murphy), whose undying love for me has always shone brightly, and without whose efforts I would never have attained such an educational opportunity.

Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>ii</i>
<i>Dedication</i>	<i>iv</i>
<i>Table of Contents</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>viii</i>
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Declaration</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>Selected Publications Related to This Work</i>	<i>xii</i>
Chapter One – Introduction	14
1.1 The problem	14
1.2 The research questions	17
1.3 The scope and significance of the project	18
1.4 The overview of the thesis	20
1.5 A personal note	22
Chapter Two – Literature review: Identity, identities, and TAFE teachers	25
2.1 Introduction	25
2.2 From identity to identities	26
2.2.1 Discourse and identities	31
2.3 Who are TAFE teachers and what is their world of work?	39
2.3.1 TAFE teachers and their changing landscape	39
2.3.2 An exploration of the impact of VET changes on teaching and TAFE teachers	44
2.3.2.1 Globalisation, the state, TAFE teachers, and their teaching	45
2.4 Chapter summary	54
Chapter Three – Conceptualising the study	55
3.1 Introduction	55
3.2 The dispositions of thinkers	55
3.3 Conceptualising ‘critical’	62
3.4 Conceptualising ‘spirit’	66
3.5 Critical thinking	68
3.6 Critical spirit	78
3.7 Chapter summary	91
Chapter Four – Methodology and methods	92
4.1 Introduction	92
4.2 The qualitative research orientation	92
4.2.1 The interpretivist position	93
4.3 The discourse analysis method	94

4.4 The data collection techniques	99
4.4.1 The artefacts	100
4.5 The data analysis techniques	105
4.5.1 Positioning critical spirit as a discourse	105
4.5.2 The critical spirit coding framework	112
4.5.2.1 The coding framework in action	113
4.5.3 Summary of method	116
4.6 The ethics and politics of the study	117
4.7 Strategies for warranting the study	124
4.8 Chapter summary	129
Chapter Five – Explicating critical spirit from TAFE teacher narrative artefacts	130
5.1 Introduction	130
5.2 The teachers’ narrative artefacts	131
5.3 The participating TAFE teachers	134
5.4 What emerged from the TAFE teachers’ narrative artefacts	135
5.4.1 Linda’s narrative	136
5.4.2 Mitchell’s narrative	137
5.5 Towards a critical spirit in TAFE teacher narratives: Some cogitations	139
5.5.1 Dewey’s reflective thought	139
5.5.2 A conceptualisation of ‘critical’	142
5.5.3 A conceptualisation of ‘spirit’	143
5.5.4 TAFE teachers’ critical thinking	145
5.5.4.1 Jean	146
5.5.4.2 Kat	148
5.5.4.3 Tina	149
5.6 Critical spirit in TAFE teacher discourse	152
5.7 Credibility checks	164
5.7.1 The participants’ views of the researcher’s analysis	166
5.7.1.1 Linda	167
5.7.1.2 Mitchell	168
5.7.1.3 Jean	168
5.7.1.4 Kat	169
5.7.1.5 Tina	170
5.7.1.6 Gus	171
5.7.1.7 Ryan	172
5.7.1.8 Matt	173
5.7.2 What TAFE teachers said – their answers to open-ended questions in the credibility checks	174
5.7.2.1 Themes that emerged from the answers to Question 1	174
5.7.2.2 Themes that emerged from the answers to Question 2	175
5.7.2.3 Themes that emerged from the answers to Question 3	176
5.7.2.4 Themes that emerged from the answers to Question 4	178
5.7.2.5 Other emergent themes	181
5.8 Chapter summary	182
Chapter Six - The TAFE teachers within	187
6.1 Introduction	187
6.2 The analysis of seven interviews	189
6.3 Seven TAFE teacher ‘kits’	193
6.3.1 Linda (Interviewed 26 June 2008)	194

6.3.1.1 What did Linda construct as significant in her relationship with TAFE?	194
6.3.1.2 What teaching identities did Linda construct?	197
6.3.1.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Linda?	199
6.3.2 Mitchell (Interviewed 23 May 2008)	205
6.3.2.1 What did Mitchell construct as significant in his relationship with TAFE?	205
6.3.2.2 What teaching identities did Mitchell construct?	206
6.3.2.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Mitchell?	208
6.3.3 Kat (Interviewed 12 June 2008)	212
6.3.3.1 What did Kat construct as significant in her relationship with TAFE?	213
6.3.3.2 What teaching identities did Kat construct?	215
6.3.3.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Kat?	217
6.3.4 Tina (Interviewed 2 July 2008)	223
6.3.4.1 What did Tina construct as significant in her relationship with TAFE?	223
6.3.4.2 What teaching identities did Tina construct?	226
6.3.4.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Tina?	229
6.3.5 Gus (Interviewed 23 June 2008)	234
6.3.5.1 What did Gus construct as significant in his relationship with TAFE?	234
6.3.5.2 What teaching identities did Gus construct?	238
6.3.5.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Gus?	239
6.3.6 Ryan (Interviewed 7 August 2008)	244
6.3.6.1 What did Ryan construct as significant in his relationship with TAFE?	244
6.3.6.2 What teaching identities did Ryan construct?	247
6.3.6.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Ryan?	247
6.3.7 Matt (Interviewed 8 August 2008)	254
6.3.7.1 What did Matt construct as significant in his relationship with TAFE?	254
6.3.7.2 What teaching identities did Matt construct?	256
6.3.7.3 How is a critical spirit discourse positioned in relation to its value to Matt?	258
6.4 An overview of seven TAFE teacher ‘kits’ as built within seven interviews	266
6.5 The value of a critical spirit discourse	274
6.6 Chapter summary	280
<i>Chapter Seven – Conclusion</i>	283
7.1 A review of the thesis	283
7.2 Some answers to the research questions	286
7.2.1 Elements of critical spirit in TAFE teachers’ discourse	287
7.2.2 The value of an explicit engagement with critical spirit	289
7.3 Contributions to knowledge	291
7.3.1 Contributions to conceptual knowledge	291
7.3.2 Contributions to methodological knowledge	292
7.3.3 Contributions to substantive knowledge	294
7.4 Revisiting my personal note	295
7.5 Possible directions for future research	297
References	300
<i>Appendix A - Letter of invitation to participate in the research project</i>	322
<i>Appendix B - Sample consent form</i>	325
<i>Appendix C - Statement of ethical clearance</i>	327
<i>Appendix D - Letter to participants regarding credibility check phase</i>	329
<i>Appendix E - Credibility check feedback form</i>	331

List of Tables

<i>Table 4.1: A coding framework for critical spirit</i>	113
<i>Table 4.2: A preliminary analysis of Linda's narrative</i>	114
<i>Table 4.3: Alignment of research questions with methods and data sources</i>	117
<i>Table 5.1: Participants and their participation in the project</i>	135
<i>Table 5.2: Conceptualisations of 'critical' paired with examples of participant discourse</i>	143
<i>Table 5.3: Scholarly conceptualisations of 'spirit' paired with examples of participant discourse</i>	144
<i>Table 5.4: An analysis of Linda's narrative</i>	154
<i>Table 5.5: An analysis of Gus's narrative</i>	158
<i>Table 5.6: Element frequency and critical spirit discourse examples</i>	161
<i>Table 5.7: Examples of chunks pertaining to a test of fortitude discourse</i>	161
<i>Table 5.8: Participant answers to Question 1: "What did you find out about yourself through the analysis of your narrative using this method?"</i>	174
<i>Table 5.9: Participant answers to Question 2: "How might this understanding of critical spirit have value to you in understanding your identity as a TAFE teacher?"</i>	175
<i>Table 5.10: Participant answers to Question 3: "How might you use this concept?"</i>	177
<i>Table 5.11: Participant answers to Question 4: "What questions came to mind when you engaged with this analysis?"</i>	179
<i>Table 6.1: The relationship among the project's 2nd research question, the data organising questions and Gee's (2005) language building tasks</i>	192
<i>Table 6.2: A synthesis of Linda's position as obtained from the analysis of her interview</i>	204
<i>Table 6.3: A synthesis of Mitchell's position as obtained from the analysis of his interview</i>	211
<i>Table 6.4: A synthesis of Kat's position as obtained from the analysis of her interview</i>	222
<i>Table 6.5: A synthesis of Tina's position as obtained from the analysis of her interview</i>	233
<i>Table 6.6: A synthesis of Gus's position as obtained from the analysis of his interview</i>	243
<i>Table 6.7: A synthesis of Ryan's position as obtained from the analysis of his interview</i>	253
<i>Table 6.8: A synthesis of Matt's position as obtained from the analysis of his interview</i>	265
<i>Table 6.9: The value of critical spirit to particular TAFE teachers</i>	276

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Declaration

I declare that the main text of this thesis is entirely my own work and that such work has not been previously submitted as a requirement for the award of a degree at the University of Southern Queensland or any other institution of higher education.

Mark Anthony Tyler

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Endorsement

Associate Professor Patrick Danaher

Principal Supervisor

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