Educator Jones and the search for 'creds': searching for credibility in workplace education

Phillip Chambers explores aspects of credibility for trainers in the fire fighting industry

Preamble

Adult educator to emergency services colleague, "If we had a few bucks to do ANY research to help us improve (the course we run) here what would YOU want to look into?"

Emergency services colleague, "Our credibility! Without it – we're sunk!"
(Field notes, Chambers 2001–2003)

Abstract

The changing nature of work has and is impacting on emergency services education programs in Australia. University-Industry partnerships are becoming more common and the learning and outcome requirements at management level is becoming more complex. Professionalisation does not bring all good news for the staff receiving training. These training outcomes have become broader and less tangible than the discrete competencies of the students initial trade education. Student discomfort causes these trade professionals to scrutinise the credibility of the academics, and the university, and demands non-trade teachers to prove their relevance in an industry where work can be life threatening.

This paper explores one academic's challenge to find credibility in the fire fighting industry by endeavouring to understand staff values surrounding credibility. It also suggests key approaches to partnerships to improve credibility for universities working in industry settings.

This paper discusses how, within this field based application, the university educator worked to establish credibility in this industry context. It aims to explore the issues that surround credibility as it affects the educational partnerships between fire services and universities, to broaden understandings about the relationship between university credibility and industry, and finally to draw conclusions about what academics can do to enhance their credibility in the emergency services.

Introduction

The nature of work is changing rapidly. Members of the New South Wales Fire Brigades (NSWFB) are not immune to changes affecting the community that they seek to serve. University-Industry partnerships are at the forefront of meeting the demands of these changes. Emergency services across the country are undergoing the professionalisation of their workplace via the introduction of educational programs in conjunction with Universities and other providers. Many senior management in these emergency services organisations see partnerships as providing broader work skills as opposed to discrete vocational competencies in addition to providing career pathways never before available to their staff by the merging of their staff training and professional degrees (Chambers 2003 pp.13 ln. 17–24).

But this is not all positive, there is concern within the NSWFB management that the 'smartening' of the workforce at inappropriate levels will make fire fighting unattractive. University involvement in emergency service education is questioned on this basis. In the midst of this tension of changing ideas about work and education it cannot be overlooked that the core business of emergency services is potentially a life-threatening activity (Moore 1996). This has a sobering effect on the adult educators involved and the issue of credibility is never far from the surface of any discussion. This paper seeks to understand more of the importance of the issue of credibility for academics working in education in the fire fighting services in Australia.

It is important to note that for this paper the focus has been on academic credibility within industry partnerships and specifically within an industry where the actions and knowledge of the individual relate to life-threatening situations and life-saving undertakings. Within this discussion on credibility the situational reference of the academic undertaking all teaching onsite at the NSWFB training facility is important. For students this is seen as the 'university coming to them' and not they joining the university. This has had an impact on the perceptions on who needs to provide credibility. This does not negate the inherent credibility of the university or its teaching staff nor the importance of industry trained students establishing their credibility as

lifelong learners. The interaction between industry and universities is an evolving area in constant change and the study of industry based student credibility as life long learners within this specific situation is a topic to be addressed in future research.

Methodology

This paper discusses aspects of one educator's challenge to 'fit-in' to the industry partners' workplaces in an effort to improve the 'uptake' of the University's involvement in the Station Officer's Promotional Program (SOPP). The journey reported here is drawn from field notes, and archival material created by the writer over an 18-month period, 2001–2003 and is based within qualitative action research undertaken throughout the development of this training program. The underpinning methodology for the research within the area of credibility, and writing of this paper, was based on a "narrative explanation" framework (Richardson 1994). The narrative explained is the insider's (writer's) own perspective on their process of learning.

Participant observer field notes (Merriam 1998) were created. These field notes initially tracked tasks and impressions relating to the work being done by the partnership and also noted important examples relating to the culture of the Brigades. Archival materials, such as course documents, teaching and assessment documents, and student and stakeholder feedback reports developed by the writer were useful in documenting changes in approaches to the delivery of the SOPP.

The data were analysed in terms of a conceptual framework developed around broad theories on credibility and then compared with attitudes and beliefs on credibility shared between fire fighters and adult educators as demonstrated within actions, formal and informal discussions, training feedback documentation, and focus groups (as seen in Table 2). These concepts and attitudes were grounded in ongoing participant feedback and triangulation between data gathered and observed application in the field. Categorisation of field notes was established (Tables 2 and 3) followed by a brief analysis of the students' responses to the actions taken by the eductor and the effects on credibility that were noticed.

This report is concluded by a summary of the research and an analysis of the issue of credibility as it relates to educational programs and perceived impacts on partnerships.

Participants

Within this research several participants and stakeholders were identified. These fell into two main categories:

• NSWFB staff and management, and
• University teachers and representatives.

The primary NSWFB participants were the students – fire fighting professionals seeking promotion, and the promotions teaching team. These students were predominately fit, active men (an industry

NSWFB Station Officers in training appreciate practical approaches to leadership training.

NSWFB Senior FireFighter Spiteri and Phill Chambers share training ideas in the classroom.

phenomenon). Although a highly physical industry, fire fighting is also one where quick, highly complex decisions need to be made under pressure. Due to the life threatening aspect of the work there is also a high level of mutual support and camaraderie within the student cohorts even when students are from geographically disperse centres. As these students are undertaking the course for career advancement there is very high levels of involvement and a willingness to not only do well but to excel. Students are always punctual, in immaculate uniforms and any out of hours work is completed on time and to a high level.

The NSWFB Training Team are themselves qualified and experienced fire fighters with many years in the brigade. Almost all of this staff have undertaken tertiary studies either in education areas or in workplace training and assessment. As such these staff are often able to 'bridge the gap' between the industry and academic understandings and perceptions.

The university teaching staff, academics and program management, involved in this program bring not only their studied knowledge of adult education, curricula development and management skills to the program but also many years of industry (non fire fighting) experience. The objectives of their involvement in this partnership are to assist in the development of academically recognised programs which will articulate into current and upcoming university degree programs benefiting both the University and the emergency services industry.

The issue of credibility

What exactly is credibility? If someone is worthy of belief are they deemed to be credible? Credibility is situated socially and is contextual. What is perceived as credible to one group or society may not be credible to another (Schechner, 1993). What a culture values can be seen as the keys to credibility within that group. Two obvious keys are 'technical' credibility (Collins 1991) and 'experiential' credibility (Boud & Solomon 2000). Universities are expert in credentialing technical learning. Value is placed on the degrees that universities award. However with the strong vocational thrust being placed on education recently (Ball 1999), university graduates are often critiqued in the workplace as having head knowledge but not job skill knowledge. Where university credibility lies in industry is still to be grappled with.

The context: The Station Officers Promotional Program

The NSWFB currently promotes its Leading Fire Fighters to the rank of Station Officer (SO) after the completion of an eight-week off-the-job training course. Entry into the Station Officers Promotional Program (SOPP) is via an entry examination with numbers determined by NSWFB Human Resources. The SOPP accepts approximately 20 candidates per course and so far three separate courses have been completed. The SOPP is an innovation in education for the NSWFB (Childs 2002, pp.107) in that it incorporates a partnership approach to "reshaping mindsets" of modern leadership (Cacioppe 1998) in what Voci and Young (2001) call a "blended learning" approach. The SOPP aims to prepare students for the role of SO by teaching across the three knowledge domains (Chambers 2003) of *Operational Skills*, *Station Administration and Management*, and *Personal Effectiveness*. The latter is the broader learning context.

Credibility in the context of the NSW Fire Brigades

Fire Services personnel are, by nature of the job, practical and value hands-on skills (Alexander 2003). From discussions with individual fire fighters it was noted they also value lived experiences. But what do they value in regard to education and promotion? Jopson (1994) describes fire-fighter values like camaraderie, the positive outcomes for workers of a discontented union (pp.165), and equality, etc., but stops short of articulating explicit values. She points to a long history of workers who were separated ideologically from their management. They were seen as "a cut above" the men and that the "class distinction between the officers and the fire fighters who served under them was very strong and…it stayed that way" (ibid, p.235). There is a clear sense of 'us' and 'them' between the rank and file trades fire fighters and the officers. Promotional

programs, then, can be seen as a focus for industrial disagreements between the union and management. The issue of credibility will never be far from the surface. But what do fire fighters really think credibility is?

Focus group on credibility in the NSW Fire Brigades: constructing a framework

Focus groups, conducted by a research developer in the NSWFB and RCLAST, were used as a work-group debrief on the topic of credibility. The groups were of mixed rank and provided insights into NSWFB cultural values on credibility. Through these discussions a consolidated list of five qualities that made up credibility was developed and outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Fire Fighter's Guide to Credibility (Chambers 2003b)	
Item Number	**Quality effecting credibility**
Quality 1	Being good at what you do
Quality 2	Doing what you say you will do
Quality 3	Explaining what you are trying to do and why
Quality 4	If you can't achieve your goal – be honest about why and what stops you getting there
Quality 5	A sound operational background

While this was a narrow focus group the broad experience gave a substantial starting point in the search for credibility in the NSWFB. These insights became a more solid frame of reference in this research. It represents an effort to develop a framework for analysing credibility by looking at values that can be jointly understood by professional adult educators and the fire fighting industry partners.

Adult education in the workplace

What do adult educators value? Adult education is activist (Freire 1973) and aims to preference the student(s) above other considerations (Boud & Solomon, 2000). In the workplace, adult education recognizes the experiences of students and offers them value for those experiences towards university degrees (Wagner et al 2001). The adult educator is seen as adaptive, and well equipped to teach and draw out of students the desire to learn by the use of thoughtful and interactive teaching methodologies (Foley 2000).

Comparison of adult education principles to focus group findings

A comparison of these defined fire fighters qualities of credibility (Table 1) with principles of adult education led to a frame for interrogating the data pertaining to

credibility. Table 2 compares the fire fighters' guide to credibility with widely agreed adult education principles.

Table 2. Comparison of fire fighter's guide to credibility with adult education principles	
Fire fighters' guide to credibility	**Adult education principles**
Being good at what you do	Professionalism (Foley, G. 2000)
Doing what you say you will do	Maintaining standards/ Social Pedagogy (Wagner et al 2001)
Explaining what you are trying to do and why	Demystification (P. Freire 1973)
If you can't achieve your goal – be honest about why and what stops you getting there	Reflection & Action (J. Dewey 1916)
A sound operational background	Applied approach (A. Makarenko 1951)

It was perceived that this alignment would make the interrogating the field notes a very focused exercise. The clarity of the framework meant that entries that were ambiguous or unimportant previously might take on new levels of significance in the light of the comparison between a fire fighter's view of credibility and the similar principles of adult education.

Table 3 shows events cited from the field notes had an impact on the credibility of the SOPP and the credibility of university involvement. These entries follow the three distinct phases of developing an off-the-job educational course. These phases are:

- planning the program;
- delivering the program teaching and assessing; and
- reviewing the program.

Phase 1 field note entries relating to the categories *applied approach*, and *demystification* and *maintaining standards*, were common. *Professionalism* was also noted an undertone.

Phase 2 entries relating to the categories *professionalism*, *reflection* and *action*, *applied approach*, *demystification* and *maintaining standards*, were all represented.

Phase 3 entries relating to the categories *reflection* and *action*, *applied approach* and *professionalism* were common.

Table 3. Categorising from the field notes

Category	Type of event and/or entry in field notes	Brief description	Examples of relevant field note entries
Professionalism	Being good/relevant at what you do in every facet of your work.	• Quality presentation increased • standing as a quality teacher/lecturer • Even on topics the class may have disagreed with, a good presentation helped • Understanding students needs (learning needs etc.) for engagement on various topics	• Good feedback reports from students • Agreeing to disagree with students rather than bearing down on their opinions • Facilitating appropriate relevant humour • Applying RPL where possible
Applied approach	Having an applied practical approach to the material being taught or presented to the class	• Getting involved in practical training • Getting involved in socialisation (acculturation) • Being non-judgmental about the creation of knowledge	• Going into the Hot Fire Cell • Shell Refinery training • History, existing partnership • "Being there" early – being around
Demystification	Communicating not obfuscating	• Using 'plain English' in the classroom. • Applying professional humility	• Admitting limitations, mistakes and errors • Not having to be the total course expert
Reflection & Action	Thinking about processes and taking appropriate actions	• Learning from mistakes • Adaptation (refining) of resources • Ensuring feedback data becomes useful information	• Changing learning materials to be more appropriate • Saying sorry quickly for errors, mistakes, course problems etc
Maintaining standards (Social Pedagogy)	Preferencing students and the integrity of the course processes	• Applying VET rules of evidence etc to in house subjects • 'Walk the talk' – do what you teach	• Dealing with HOT issues: "What's in house – stays in house." • Ensuring study/research time

Table 4. Responses to actions and effects on credibility

Category	Example Actions	Response: Students/ stakeholders	Effect on Credibility
Professionalism	Class teaching technique	Skills were taken as expected but teaching style appreciated	Positive
Applied approach	Getting involved in practical training and socialising	Was unexpected	Very positive
Demystification	Explaining approaches and theory in plain English	Was unexpected and appreciated	Positive
Positive Reflection & Action	Listening to concerns and making adjustments	Was unexpected and appreciated	Positive but ambiguous – sign of weakness?
Maintaining standards	Practicing the 'people skills' facilitated in class	Was taken as expected	Positive

Phase 1 – Planning the program

Phase 1 was with industry colleagues. There was no contact with students due to industrial conditions and a pre-entry exam process that selected students on the basis of a ranking system finalised two weeks prior to the first program commenced. It was discussed and agreed that the delivery and assessment by the University would be in non-operational subjects such as leadership, management, team development, training and education processes. In addition, some subjects could be co-taught. The co-delivery subjects were along administrational and station management lines where content was considered dry and uninteresting. These would have been industry taught subjects but suggestions of certain interactive delivery methodologies caught the attention of industry partners so a co-teaching approach was adopted.

Phase 2 – Delivering the program teaching and assessing

Entries show the eductor was, at times, in an uncomfortable environment personally and professionally. Some class content was deemed less applicable which added to the pressure the educator to be credible. Other entries showed an easing of the pressure due to the 'people' side of the categories. Those sorts of things moved into the adult educator's comfort zone where students' ideas in the class are facilitated to develop (Foley, 2000. p.49).

Phase 3 – Reviewing the program

The reviewing phase was primarily with colleagues but also with limited contact with students. A more explicit assessment schedule was created for the subsequent classes. This tightening flagged some major improvements for the candidates. Among other things it indicated more rigorous class assessment policies which preference student needs for information about the assessment outcomes above previous models.

Students' and stakeholders' responses to actions and perceived effects on credibility

Table 4 relates categories and actions to the responses by students and the effect that those actions and responses had on the perceived level of credibility.

It can be seen that the application of those categories caused a positive effect on the teacher's and University's credibility – the variance being the category, *reflection* and *action*, where the response was positive but ambiguous. It is often the case that when a university challenges the perception of the academy held by students it can cause them to be "uncertain" and "challenging" to their mindsets (Houlbrook, in Wagner et al 2001).

Summary analysis

One can summarise that if the university educator makes an intentional effort to work within the five categories identified in Table 2, then they can expect a generally more positive response to the perception of their credibility while working within the fire fighting industry. Another significant finding was the two keys of credibility noted in the earlier discussion also found resonance in this study. The writer experienced 'respect' when operating as a 'professional', but also 'inclusion' in the group when operating in an 'applied approach'. Ironically however, with 'inclusion' came testing that could have had a detrimental effect on credibility. These need to be negotiated and the teacher–student relationship maintained to reduce ambiguity and risk of damage.

Conclusion

It continues to be the case that emergency services education will be under pressure to meet the demands of a changing workplace with the resultant industry-university partnerships and a professionalisation of emergency services training. The need for frontline management staff to be broadly equipped in complex skills such as various forms of leaderships will continue to grow. In reality these partnerships may not be welcomed into working cultures that may perceive themselves to be 'under threat' by the outside world. Those perceived as being part of this 'outside world' will have to work hard to establish their credibility. This paper provided some initial insights into one academic's endeavours to establish and maintain credibility as a non-fire fighting 'outsider' but integral part of the NSWFB education team.

New questions have emerged from this research. If university-industry partnerships of any kind are to succeed how will they grapple with the issues surrounding credibility? How do educators respond to industry demands on their credibility that not only force them out of their comfort zone, but also out of their ethical zone? What impact will a potential loss of credibility have on the ability of universities to stay competitive in the education market? How does the training site (i.e. onsite at the place of business) affect the need to establish academic credibility and how does this compare with the educational institutions' demand for adult students to establish their credibility as life long learners? These questions are worthy starting points for future research.

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