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**SEX-TYPED:
THE IMPACT OF CHANGES IN THE POLYTECHNIC
ENVIRONMENT ON
WOMEN OFFICE SYSTEMS LECTURERS**

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Abstract

Over the past two decades there has been a good deal of “official” accounting of organisational change and the restructuring of post-compulsory education in New Zealand. Some key players in the administration of the educational reforms have given accounts of these changes. However, this research raises a different set of voices. My study gives accounts of change, different from the official accounts, based on the experiences of office systems lecturers teaching in the polytechnic sector during the 1990s.

By the late 1980s the rate of change in polytechnics had begun to accelerate within the context of general political upheaval and the policies of the “new right”. Throughout the same period, computer technology advanced at an unprecedented rate having a profound effect on the polytechnic environment and especially upon women teaching in office systems. This research measures the effect of “reforms” that reshaped the polytechnic environment, particularly in the 1990s, in terms of their impact on the experience of office systems lecturers involved. It offers an interpretation of how these women made sense of these changes to the institution in which they worked.

My thesis utilises feminist perspectives to demonstrate that women teaching in office systems departments are both subject to, and draw upon a number of gendered and classed discursive fields to make sense of the changes in their workplace. These discursive fields are identified in the research as “working class”, “maternal” and “professional”. This thesis concludes with reflections about positive opportunities, and some constraints, for office systems women, sex-typed within the identified discursive fields, shaping and making accessible “new” subject positions in the polytechnic of the 21st century.

In memoriam
Kathleen Ann Boothroyd
9 January, 1943-1 July, 2002

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Introduction: different sets of voices

Subjectivity is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of understanding her relation to the world (Weedon, 1987, p. 33).

Some women who teach “secretarial” subjects in the polytechnic environment describe themselves as “office systems ladies” or “typing tutors”, illustrating how subjectivity is influenced by multiple and competing discourses in their gendered workplace. The aim of this research is to explore the accounts of office systems lecturers in terms of their experiences of being “secretarial teachers” prior to and following the “reforms” - that is the education reforms that reshaped polytechnic education, particularly in the 1990s.

My voice as author in this thesis is interpretative, critical and partial (Haraway, 1988). My sense of self has been shaped by my experience as an office systems lecturer (and an office systems “lady”) for nearly 20 years. During this time I have encountered the polytechnic as an institution in my everyday life, and shared similar experiences to those of the women interviewed in this study. I have had firsthand experience of a lack of recognition of women’s ways of thinking and talking (Belenkey, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986). In the past I have experienced the polytechnic as hierarchical and silencing and “a discourse not intended for her” (Lewis & Simon, 1986, p. 1). There have been times when I have

been described as “a square peg in a round hole” and as a result I have felt grateful just to have my job.

Over the past two decades there has been a great deal of “official” accounting of organisational change and the restructuring of post-compulsory education in New Zealand. The successes, or otherwise, of policies of the “new right”¹ which have seen polytechnic training move from something believed to be good and desirable, and everybody’s due, to a contestable commodity that can be bought and sold, have been well documented (Dougherty, 1999; Olssen & Morris-Matthews, 1997). Some key players in the administration of the education reforms and the resultant organisational change have given accounts of these changes (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). However, this research raises a different set of voices. My study gives voice to different accounts of organisational change; accounts based on the experiences of office systems lecturers during this period of change.

By the late 1980s the rate of change in polytechnics had begun to accelerate within the context of general political upheaval and the policies of the new right. During the 1990s change in the polytechnic sector intensified. Throughout the same period, computer technology advanced at an unprecedented rate having a profound effect on the polytechnic environment and especially upon women in office systems.

There have been notable changes in education resulting from structural reform. In the past two decades the New Zealand “education experiment” has attracted world-wide attention (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). Much of this attention has been focused on assessing the outcomes of reforms arising from the Picot (1988, Department of Education), Meade (1988, New Zealand Early Childhood Care and Education Working Group), Hawke (1989, Department of Education) and Todd (1994, Ministry of Education) Reports as well as Lockwood Smith’s² vision of a seamless education system. Similarly, it is claimed that the concept of a New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) is much more ambitious and

1 The ‘new right’ is defined here as the neo-liberal platform of social and economic policy based on notions of a reduced role of the state, a venerated individual, and a “free” marketplace.

2 Lockwood Smith appointed Minister of Education in the 1990 National Government.

sophisticated than anywhere else in the world (Butterworth & Butterworth; 1998; Codd, 1997; Dougherty, 1999). Some of the most dramatic changes have been in the post-compulsory polytechnic sector³ where the numbers of students, and the diversity of courses offered have burgeoned, and where ever increasing emphasis is placed on academic reputations and aggressive marketing to attract students (Dougherty, 1999).

The architects of educational reform through the 1990s ensured that records of the outcomes of their actions would be kept. Key players contributed to a history of the period which was commissioned in June 1996 and prepared by the Historical Branch of the Department of Internal Affairs (see Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998). Information for this history was gathered from interviews with all the Ministers of Education since 1984, and two Associate Ministers. All the relevant chief executive officers and the chairpersons of the three main task forces - Picot, Hawke and Meade - made submissions. Information was sought from representatives of the New Zealand Educational Institute, the New Zealand Post Primary Teachers' Association, the Secondary Principals' Association; The New Zealand Treasury, and the State Services Commission. These submissions were all represented in this official record.

In general, polytechnics responded enthusiastically to the new opportunities that have emerged since the reforms (Butterworth & Butterworth, 1998; Dougherty, 1999). This enthusiastic response has been linked to growth in student numbers and a proliferation of new courses in the polytechnic sector. It is relatively easy to measure the success of the reforms in terms of proximity of the results to the designers' aims in this way. However, this thesis undertakes the more difficult job of measuring the effect of reforms in terms of their impact on the experience of office systems lecturers involved, and offering an interpretation of how these women made sense of these changes to the institutions in which they worked.

In this thesis, I utilise feminist perspectives to demonstrate that women teaching in office systems departments are both subject to, and draw upon a number of discourses to make

³ Includes providers of tertiary education known as polytechnics, institutes of technology, technical institutions or community colleges under the Education Amendment Act, 1990.

sense of the changes in their workplace. I identify these discourses and demonstrate how they operate as linguistic resources for the women to account for their working lives, both in terms of how they became typing tutors and their subsequent experience of the educational reforms of the 1990s.

In giving voice to friends and colleagues it is my hope that this study will be of use in a practical sense to all women in office systems departments, administration staff, lecturers and students, and that we will continue to share our experiences as we continue to make sense of our experiences, and of ourselves, in the gendered workplace.

Structure of the thesis

Chapter one provides an outline of the history and growth of polytechnics in New Zealand. Organisational changes are identified as a backdrop to the experiences of office systems women working within the polytechnic environment.

Chapter two begins with an overview of feminist literature in the areas of “women and work”. Key themes within this literature that relate to the present study are the distinctions between women’s “private” and “public” worlds and the shaping of a discourse which assumes women’s “natural” role within the home. Literature which focuses on women and secretarial work, commercial training, and women and technology is then examined. This chapter concludes with an overview of perspectives from literature around organisational change in polytechnics.

Chapter three outlines the research methodology for the present study. I outline the research design and describe the data collection method and the steps I undertook to analyse the data through the lens of feminist poststructuralist theory. This chapter concludes with some biographical information about some of the participants in the study.

Chapter four introduces my empirical work and presents extracts from the interviews with office systems women. I identify particular discursive fields which I have called “working class”, and “maternal” to illustrate how office systems women participating in this study use these to make sense of how they became office systems lecturers.

Chapter five is a continuation of my empirical work that identifies the multiple and competing discourses that office systems women draw upon to talk about their experience of the reforms. This chapter focuses on the “professional” discourses office systems lecturers utilise to make meaning of the changes that have occurred in their work environment over the past decade.

My thesis concludes with reflections about positive opportunities, and some constraints, for office systems women within the identified discourses, shaping and making accessible “new” subject positions. In this final section of my thesis I reflect on the process that brought it to fruition and the contribution made by the participants on the journey who nurtured it and me along the way.