Regenerating the Australian landscape of professional VET practice: Practitioner-driven changes to teaching and learning *by Jane Figgis*

Introduction

Donald Schon once famously pictured professional practice as a high, hard ground overlooking a swamp. The high ground is the place of theory and, one might add, of policy. The swampy lowland is where vocational education and training (VET) practitioners meet the learners. It is where the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they wish to see instilled in learners are (or are not) acquired. The problems encountered in the swampy lowlands are messy and without definitive solutions. But, as Schon insists, these are the important problems. The solutions practitioners contrive here make a difference to the learning, to the opportunities and to the lives of real people.

This study was of and for the swampy lowlands of VET practice, based on discussions with practitioners and with VET managers responsible for teaching and learning. It is about the ways people are changing their pedagogy in response to what they observe in their working world:

> We were troubled because the apprentices didn't seem fully engaged and their work was of poor quality. What we wanted was for them to love making furniture as much as we did.

> We began to see that even the diploma students were going out into employment as passive receivers, when what the industry wants and needs are pro-active people. If we didn't deliver that, they would give up on our training.

> We were bored. And if we were bored, what about the students?

> I thought we had been teaching digital media quite well, but at an industry forum one employer stood up and said we were doing a terrible job!

The changes in pedagogy initiated by concerned practitioners fall into six distinct groups which can be thought of as six trends in the changing practice of teaching and learning. These trends, at least in the hands of the responsive practitioner groups interviewed, were leading to improved learning; improved not only for the clients of the registered training organisations (RTOs) but for the staff involved too. The six trends are:

1. Assigning authentic learning tasks

Authentic learning tasks are complex and ill-defined tasks which require the learners to make choices, think about what to do next (and why), and access a variety of resources. To be authentic the task must mimic the way the skill and knowledge being learned would be used in the real world —for example, under pressure of time or customer demands—and take a sustained period of time to complete: days, weeks, even months rather than minutes or hours. The solutions different learners or groups of learners come up with will be diverse: authentic tasks do not have single 'right' answers.

What makes assigning authentic tasks attractive to many practitioners is their alignment with a constructivist view of learning. The principle of constructivism—that learning is the outcome of the learner actively experiencing and reflecting, constructing meaning—was explained wonderfully by John Dewey in 1916 (although he did not label it constructivism):

> Methods which are permanently successful in formal education give the student something to do, not something to learn, but the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking. (quoted in Barnes, Christensen and Hansen 1994, p5)

The logic of basing teaching and learning on a constructivist philosophy has become thoroughly embedded in most spheres of education.

The trend to assign learning tasks that are authentic has also been bolstered by the observation

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that these tasks—demanding, interesting, real world tasks—motivate learners. The drawback is that teaching through authentic tasks makes new and quite challenging demands on practitioners. It is no small order to come up with tasks that are simultaneously effective in generating the requisite learning *and* achievable by the learners *and* deeply engaging. Practitioners report that it often takes several attempts before the approach works relatively predictably, and even then new learner groups or new bright ideas from the learners themselves may mean that readjustments, both minor and major, may be required.

By all accounts, however, the most difficult challenge in teaching through authentic tasks is surrendering control. The practitioner is still responsible for the specified competencies and learning outcomes but the process— the journey by which it's accomplished—has been handed over to these not-yet-competent people.

2. Peer learning

The fundamental point of peer learning is that students work in pairs or larger groups (for longer or shorter periods of time) to jointly construct their learning. The practitioner, in that much over-used aphorism, is 'the guide on the side, not the sage on the stage'. Authentic tasks almost always require learners to work in groups because the scope and standard is often greater— purposely greater—than any single student could accomplish on his/her own. But peer groups can operate in other ways too.

The way members are selected for these groups by practitioners is interesting in its own right. There are examples of particularly rich peer learning precisely because 'peers' were selected to have disparate skills and even skill levels (certificate III, IV and diploma-level students working on a single project). Some practitioners create physical 'learning spaces' where students can drop in and work together informally. Online chat rooms create peer collaboration spaces, as do intensive week-long workshops which are a feature of many certificate programs (and apprenticeships, although there they are not generally called workshops).

3. Using e-learning technologies

Communication and information technologies have opened up opportunities that simply were not available ten, or even five, years ago, and many practitioners have grasped the possibilities with verve and imagination. E-learning is currently developing along a few different dimensions: as a tool for communicating to learners and for learners networking amongst themselves (and practitioners amongst themselves); as a platform for engaging tasks; and as a source of resources. The Australian Flexible Learning Framework has been fundamental to this expansion both by supporting e-learning and by comprehensively recording developments.

It is sometimes said that practitioners must consider the 'learning' in e-learning before thinking about the 'e' (the technology). Certainly, many e-learning facilitators do ask practitioners what their teaching/learning goals are before they consider what e-learning tools might support or foster them. But there are equally legitimate cases where practitioners just play with the technology and then think how it might be used—the way, for example, some practitioners are currently experimenting with using the three-dimensional virtual world *Second Life* with its millions of online residents as a site for learners to undertake various tasks.

The point is that the 'e' and the 'learning' are tightly connected. They form a loop, influencing one another. It does need to be pointed out that just because something is on-line does not make it interesting. Indeed, classroom material simply parked online is almost bound to be uninteresting, and decidedly not using the medium to advantage.

4. Work-based learning

There are two developments in work-based learning that go well beyond traditional 'classroom' (or training-room) teaching at the work site and even beyond informal learning in the workplace, as important as that is.

The first is using people's active, natural engagement in their work as the primary vehicle for credentialed (or credential-able) learning—an extreme form of an authentic learning task. A theme consistent through the interviews, and in the literature, is that for an external RTO practitioner to deliver specified learning outcomes in a way that does not disrupt (or only very minimally disrupts) the regular pattern of work takes him/her onto new and difficult terrain. It is, in the words of one practitioner "a huge mental leap". To ensure the desired learning happens in that environment, the training has to be holistic, training packages unpacked and repacked and repacked yet again. Further, the practitioner has to understand and work within the constraints imposed by the culture of the enterprise and its internal politics.

As valuable as a naturalistic environment can be for learning, it should also be recognised that learning while working is not necessarily the best option. There are distractions and production pressures that interfere with learning or preclude the learner experimenting and learning by making mistakes. Practitioners need to calibrate carefully the potential quality of the learning experience in different environments.

The second change lies in what some enterprises and, indeed, whole communities are asking of VET. They want help in overall workforce planning and capability development. Peter Waterhouse calls this ambition to change practitioners' role from training/teaching to workforce development a "re-purposing" of VET or "climbing up the hierarchy of VET purposes" (Waterhouse 2008).

5. Personalising learning

Two aspects to 'personalising' learning were evident. The first is adjusting an individual's learning program in light of their prior learning and existing competence. There are jurisdictions and RTOs that require each learner undergo a recognition of prior learning (or current competency) process at the start of their Certificate course. The skill and knowledge the individual has already developed must then be taken into account. Practitioners need to design out all redundancies of the person's learning program. This is a significant change for many, if not most, established VET practitioners.

The second aspect of 'personalising learning' is to provide individual support for learners. Often this is done through mentoring or coaching, but personal support does not necessarily require a special program. In fact, at some point during most of the interviews, the interviewee(s) would mention, as obvious and unexceptional, that the best teaching/training—old and new—has the quality of the relationship between practitioner and learner at its heart.

6. Devolution of expertise within RTOs in support of fresh practice

Most public RTOs have established over the past five years (earlier in a few cases) units designed to improve the quality and effectiveness of the teaching/training programs offered. These support units go by a variety of names: 'teaching and learning'; 'educational development'; 'innovation'; or some combination of these. The original focus of these units was on what might be labelled 'traditional' professional development where practitioners *come in* to learn about new developments and practices 'that work'.

What was striking is how many of these units are—or are planning—to go out to practitioner teams and workgroups. In effect, donning their waders and venturing into the swampy lowlands of practice. Interestingly, the staff in these support units are using the same techniques to develop the skill and knowledge of practitioners as the innovative practitioners are using with their own students: authentic tasks, peer learning, e-learning, work-based learning and providing individualised support. Thus, the stories of what these teaching/learning support units are doing precisely mirrors the trends described above.

It is interesting to note that informal learning plays a central role in all six of the observed trends in teaching and learning in VET. It may be that the vitality that seems part and parcel of the new practices comes from the fact that each leaves open—and invites in—a considerable element of informal learning, of 'extra' learning that was unplanned but not unintended.

Perhaps it is because these trends are introducing an element of the spontaneous and idiosyncratic to vocational learning, but it is nonetheless surprising that so few people out of almost 50 interviewed mentioned the third leg of teaching and learning: assessment. Assessment, after all, is central to learning. One would expect, in light of the other trends—especially the use of complex and ill-defined authentic tasks, peer learning and group projects, e-learning (and group projects), and work-based learning—that assessment would also need to be re-visited and imaginative, innovative approaches would be under development across the sector. But apparently not. So, a question: is there a seventh 'missing' trend in refreshing teaching and learning in VET?

One thing that was very clear from the study is that practitioners who actively think about changing their practice share certain attributes. These are: (i) reflective; (ii) responsive to and respectful of learners; (iii) closely engaged with local enterprises; and (iv) reaching out to learn from and share their own knowledge with other practitioners. These four qualities appear to establish the bedrock from which practitioners can set out to seriously consider rebuilding their practice.

It must be said that there would be very few VET practitioners in Australia who do not share these four traits to some extent. It is the degree that makes the

difference. The degree that determines whether being reflective, responsive, engaged with industry and with colleagues is sufficiently strong, honest and compelling to open oneself to change—to agree, as one theologian expressed it, "to put their own understanding of things at risk".

A final word about ways this study might be used

The practitioners and managers who talked about what they were doing differently—what they were doing to make a difference for learners, for employers and, if truth be told, for themselves as professionals—did so because they hoped their stories would get conversational balls rolling. They wanted their experience of changing their practice to encourage, even inspire, others to rethink their practice, their habits and assumptions.

There is a tale about what makes a city a dynamic and vibrant place. One starts with a small village. Picture the villagers as blue dots. But there might be one person in the village who is exceptionally innovative. Colour her red. Now picture a small town. The inhabitants are still mostly blue dots but scattered amongst them are a few red ones. A large town now: there is a sea of blue dots but some of the red dots have gotten together in little pods and the interaction within them is driving their creativity to new heights. As the town grows larger there are more pods of red dots. It becomes a city when the blue dots start turning purple.

This study was conducted in that spirit. The full report is a rich amalgam of examples, ideas and possibilities about teaching and learning that have been generated by innovative VET practitioners—by red dots—inhabiting the swampy lowland of practice. It is even the case that the VET red dots tend to work in pods. Most of the fresh practice emerged from work groups rather than from individual practitioners.

The report will have done its job if the work of the innovators presented is amplified and extended by its readers. If readers talk amongst themselves about the ideas presented and think seriously, but playfully, about the implications for their own practice. If the paper generates argument and debate and experimentation, it will have achieved its aim. And the swamp will be turning a nice shade of purple.

References

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