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Title: **The Relevance of Adult Learning Principles to the Teaching of Applied Learning Programs to Youth.**

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Introduction and Background

In 2002 the Victorian Department of Education and Training (DE&T) introduced a trial pilot of a new post-compulsory school education certificate. The trial pilot involved 15 government secondary colleges, five Catholic secondary colleges and two TAFE institutes.

The certificate was the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). This certificate was developed through the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) for students in the post-compulsory years of education – equivalent to Years 11 and 12 in the Victorian education system. The certificate was designed to expand the choice of pathways available to young people from school to work and/or further education and training. VCAL was accredited by the VQA in 2002 and has now been introduced beyond the trial pilot into Victorian schools, TAFE institutes and Adult Community Education organisations. In 2003 in excess of 200 secondary schools are offering VCAL learning programs along with the majority of TAFE institutes and a number of ACE providers.

VCAL was developed as a state government response to the broad range of education and learning needs of students identified in research that informed the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria (Kirby 2000). The Ministerial Review identified that the post compulsory educational experience for an increasing proportion of young people in Victoria between the ages of 15 and 19 was an unsatisfactory one for them, their families and for our society. It was recognised that the existing accredited course arrangement prior to the introduction of VCAL, essentially the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), which determined the quality of Victoria's post compulsory education experience for the cohort of students staying on in schools through Years 11 and 12 was producing inequitable outcomes for significant numbers of young people (Kirby, 2000, pp. 61-64)

There was available to the Ministerial Review an abundance of research reports conducted throughout the past decade that unequivocally supported the above conclusion, not only in the case of Victoria but in the other States and Territories of Australia as well (Henry et al, 2003). This body of research has been analysed by several recent government (both State and Commonwealth) reviews and program evaluations. It is this research throughout the latter half of the 1990s and the commissioned reviews of the past three years that provided the sound evidentiary platform for the development and trialing of VCAL in 2002.

The VET in Schools initiative in the early 1990s was a significant development for many, though not all, secondary colleges exploring alternative accreditation for senior students looking to engage with more vocationally-oriented courses. Later in the decade VET in School courses were integrated selectively into the VCE as VCE VET units, along with the introduction of foundation units in English and Mathematics to address the lower levels of literacy and numeracy showing up in a significant proportion of Year 11 students as the post compulsory years retention rates increased.

This development was a mixed blessing. Students completing VET courses could now achieve dual accreditation for their studies – recognition by the State Training Authority under the VET sector course accreditation system and the Australian Qualifications Framework, and recognition of the VET courses as units of study within their VCE course of study and therefore contributing to their overall VCE tertiary

entrance score. This development made the selected VCE VET units more available to the full Year 11 and Year 12 cohort but now securely within the structure of the VCE. But for many students for whom the schools had originally developed alternative senior school programs, and for whom VET courses were seen as most appropriate, moving the VET units into the VCE was a move in the wrong direction. What was required to satisfy the study aspirations of these students was the local flexibility and responsiveness of the alternative experimental programs and the clear pathways to vocational education and training and work that these provided, together with external recognition of student achievement. This was unlikely to be achieved through the integration of VET into the VCE structure with the re-assertion of the academic learning paradigm.

Significantly, there were still secondary schools continuing with the attempts to develop alternative programs for students disengaging from the mainstream curriculum offerings. This was most apparent at the middle school years of Years 9 and 10, although there were schools extending this approach into Year 11 alongside the VCE. Other schools attempted to accommodate their cohorts of 'less academically inclined' students in a modified VCE program based on Foundation English and Mathematic Units, and VCE VET units. But pressure was building from many schools for substantial change in the accredited course options at Years 11 and 12. The modified VCE programs were only partially meeting the needs of those students taking them. Many students participating in Year 10 alternative programs did not see the modified VCE in Year 11 as a viable or useful pathway for them. For these students the options were to leave school altogether and hopefully find work and/or attempt further study with TAFE or ACE providers.

The introduction of the VCAL through the trial project in 2002 was in direct response to this situation. The VCAL structure recognised, in many cases, the innovative approaches these responsive teachers were already taking, but, importantly, it now provided these schools with an accredited award.

From this brief analysis, it is apparent that VCAL was introduced in 2002 in response to a groundswell from innovating secondary schools working to address more broadly the educational needs of their students particularly in the post compulsory years. The introduction of VCAL also occurred at a time when the literature on post compulsory education was providing a rationale and justification for such a programmatic initiative.

The VCAL Qualification Framework

The VCAL qualification framework allows local providers to develop VCAL learning programs by grouping accredited curriculum from a range of sources. These learning programs can be offered at three award levels – VCAL (Foundation), VCAL (Intermediate) and VCAL (Senior). VCAL learning programs are accredited as senior secondary school qualifications in the post-compulsory sector and can be delivered by schools and RTOs currently recognised by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority as VCE providers.

The curriculum mapping advice provided by VQA to local providers of VCAL is encapsulated in the following diagram:

The accredited units included in VCAL learning programs are inserted into one of the four VCAL curriculum strands and can be drawn from any combination of VCAL units, VCE units, VCE VET units or VET/FE accredited curriculum. One credit is awarded for the completion of a unit where a unit can be a VCAL unit, a VCE unit, a VCE VET unit or VET/FE curriculum where a combination of units or modules add up to approximately 100 nominal hours of accredited curriculum.

A VCAL learning program must include a minimum of one unit to the value of one credit for literacy and the same for numeracy. In each of the other three VCAL curriculum strands curriculum, there must be included components to the value of at least one credit.

A VCAL learning program that meets accreditation requirements must be made up of units that will provide a minimum of ten credit points on successful completion. In addition, the learning program must include units to the value of five credit points at the level of the VCAL award of which one credit at the award level must be for literacy and one credit at the award level must be for a VCAL Personal Development Skills unit.

Evaluation of VCAL Trial Pilot 2002

The VCAL trial pilot was evaluated by a team from the Research Institute of Professional and Vocational Education & Training (RIPVET). The evaluation team produced an Interim Report in July which, amongst other recommendations, recommended that

“that VCAL continue to be developed, expanded and secured within the Victorian system of education and training for young people seeking an accredited course of study other than those currently available through the structure of the VCE” (Henry et al, 2002, pp. 3).

A final evaluation report was completed in March 2003. This report included seven case studies – six of school VCAL providers and one of a TAFE provider of VCAL.

The evaluation of the VCAL trial pilot in 2002 identified a number of critical development needs which the evaluation team thought important for both local providers and DE&T to address if statewide adoption of VCAL was to be successful.

These critical development needs identified by the evaluation team were:

- The need for a new conceptualisation of quality curriculum that resists the domination of the generalised/abstracted knowledge-based curriculum experiences of the mainstream secondary school education, and establishes instead applied learning of vocationally-oriented knowledge as a sustainable and valued pathway for students;
- The need for the development of teaching approaches for secondary school students that are informed by the principles of adult education and, as a result, are a clear departure from the teacher-based, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that are still very much the norm in secondary schools today;
- The need for schools to enter into new partnerships and collaborative arrangements with other schools in their regions and with local community service agencies, employers, and TAFE and ACE providers in order to address more comprehensively the educational, training and

- employment needs of young people enrolled in applied learning and vocational education courses;
- ❑ The need for an expanded conception of the role of the teacher, as part of a diverse range of efforts necessary to address the above three points;
 - ❑ The need to develop schools as more broadly based, inclusive and flexible learning and social environments for young people; and
 - ❑ The need to overturn negative stakeholder perceptions about vocationally-oriented applied learning in comparison to vocationally-oriented academic learning, and to general and abstracted education.

It is argued that VCAL as an intervention and as an innovation in the post-compulsory accredited curriculum arena of our schools and RTOs presents significant challenges. The VCAL Evaluation Report made the point as follows:

“The VCAL has the potential to become a powerful influence for change to the form of institutionalised secondary education that became established during the previous century. The institutional boundaries once so rigorously set at the school gate have progressively been moving to embrace a wider and more complex world of community and work. For many, VCAL will represent the next step in that progression. Those schools able to commit themselves to meeting the challenge VCAL poses - in changing themselves rather than diminishing the full potential of VCAL - will become models of a revitalised secondary schooling attuned to the demands of youth education in the twenty first century” (Henry et al, 2003, pp. 3).

The changes anticipated here are across the full range of curriculum, teaching/delivery and organisational arrangements. Given the scope of this paper the full range of recommended developments included in the VCAL Final Evaluation Report cannot be addressed. However, a targeted selection from these anticipated changes to post-compulsory education practice is discussed below.

Partnerships and Collaborative Arrangement

The introduction of VCAL in Victoria in 2002 has had the effect of re-aligning secondary schools with their local communities. This re-alignment has occurred through the relationships established by schools with community organisations and agencies, and with businesses and enterprises in order to improve VCAL curriculum and its delivery. Schools’ core business has become, with the introduction of VCAL, a joint school/community endeavour. The partnership arrangements established by individual schools showed a high degree of variation across the pilot provider sites, but nevertheless VCAL provision was reliant on the availability of community resources, and the types of community resources available to a school was an important influence on the form of each provider’s VCAL learning program.

Part of the shift in practice required by VCAL entailed schools taking on a more collaborative relationship with other schools in their region, where previously a more competitive relationship may have existed. Fortunately in some regions, strong co-operative relationships were already in existence, such as around the management of VET in Schools delivery, and in some rural regions around the sharing of VCE units.

An indispensable feature of successful partnerships between VCAL providers was the effective facilitation and coordination of these partnerships beyond the level of one-to-one arrangements. This level of organisation across schools within a region requires more dedicated resources for facilitation and coordination than can be supplied typically through the partner organisations themselves. Where these clusters of schools have been particularly effective amongst VCAL pilot sites, regionally based personnel have been instrumental in the support of the cluster level activities.

In this context, a critical success factor at the local level was the establishment of a regionally based consortium of local providers together with representatives of local community organisations and employers. Where this critical success factor has been addressed during the VCAL trial pilot in 2002, the Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) of the region had often been a significant facilitating and

coordinating agency along with key personnel from the DE&T Regional Office.

There is a further observation on partnership arrangements that is particularly relevant to TAFE institutes delivering VCAL. The distinctive partnership implications for TAFE institute providers of VCAL are to a certain extent related to the particular profiles of the VCAL student cohorts enrolled. For VCAL students with a poor history of engagement in formal learning and with attendant social distractions then partnership arrangements between the TAFE institutes and their local secondary schools may be more appropriate for the Personal Development Strand of the VCAL Learning Program while TAFE institutes focusing more directly on the provision of the Industry Specific Skills development of their VCAL students. This TAFE Institute/School arrangement may better provide a bridge into the adult-oriented learning environment of the TAFE sector for VCAL students not currently ready for the full TAFE experience.

There is an additional issue particularly relevant for TAFE institutes. TAFE institutes have established partnership arrangements with the employers and their organisations within their particular training delivery market places. The good will associated with these partnerships is important to the commercial activity of the TAFE institutes. Consequently, TAFE institutes are mindful of these institute/employer partnerships when introducing their VCAL students to employment-related experiences through work placements/work experience programs. Relationships with employers can be put at risk through inappropriate VCAL student behaviours in the workplace and this has the potential for influencing an institute's standing with employers and, as a direct outcome, in its training market place. It could be that employers' expectations are higher for TAFE-based students than for school-based students, and that these different expectations may be transferred to TAFE-based VCAL students.

VCAL students at TAFE institutes, as for school-based VCAL students, need graded exposure to the workplace, but the consequences of misjudgement here on the part of a TAFE institute may have wider consequences for the institute than for a school in a similar situation.

Applied Learning and Student Engagement

The evaluation of the VCAL trial pilot learning programs in 2002 identified the vexed issue of accommodating the learning needs of post-compulsory school students who were, by and large, disaffected by their prior learning experiences and were apprehensive and perhaps less than enthusiastic about engaging with the academically oriented VCE albeit modified to some extent by the inclusion of VCE VET units since 2000. Amongst the students who enrolled in VCAL in 2002, 28% would not have returned to school after completing Year 10. In addition to these students, VCAL coordinators identified many more students enrolled in their VCAL programs as unlikely to satisfactorily complete Year 11 if VCAL learning programs were not available. The literature refers to students who have a tenuous connection to ongoing education and employment as 'at risk' (James et al, 2001, for example).

The information gathered throughout the evaluation illustrated the problematic nature of the 'at risk' concept as applied to senior secondary school students. There is a strong tendency generally for the 'at risk' concept to be defined as a student-determining factor and then applied accordingly. Within this conceptualisation of the 'at risk' student are correlating factors or student characteristics expressed in terms associated with the student learning abilities or capacities, learning styles and preferences, attitudes and motivation levels, family background, gender and levels of self esteem. This mix of factors defines the 'at risk' student identity as being sourced essentially from within the students themselves in association with their background social and familial environments. The contribution of prior educational experiences within school classrooms tends not to figure prominently within school-based discourses associated with 'at risk' student behaviours.

The evaluation of VCAL pilot learning programs identified that when there was a shift in the school culture as experienced by students through their VCAL learning programs, there was also a change in the engagement of students with respect to their learning programs and their pathways. It could be argued that the VCAL learning experience had addressed the psychological factors for the previously identified 'at risk' students in the VCAL cohorts and that this was what had contributed to the improvement in student engagement with learning. No doubt psychological factors are involved with respect to learning styles and

preferences, for example, but the evaluative data indicate that the reality is more complex. The central factor appeared to be the changes in the nature of the relationships the VCAL students were able to build amongst themselves and, importantly, with their teachers. With these changed relationships, schools (and the TAFE institutes) as places for learning and socialising, had become decidedly different places for the VCAL students compared to what they had been for them in the past. The provider organisations were now teaching/learning places in which the students received positive attention, where their interests were more-or-less accommodated, where teachers and peers treated them with a greater measure of respect, where they now had a positive learning group identity, and, most importantly, where they experienced success.

The information gathered during the evaluation of VCAL in 2002 provides evidence for the claim that VCAL learning programs can establish a programmatic context within which the VCAL provider institutions were able to be experienced by students as more self-affirming learning environments. Changes within schools and TAFE institutes in this direction were able to create the circumstances within which the 'at risk' student identifier and its underlying conceptualisation could be challenged.

What was occurring here in the VCAL trial pilot sites? We think the shifts that were occurring in the VCAL learning programs for both young people and teachers were associated with a partial adoption of adult learning principles¹ within the teaching/learning environment. In contrast, Carbines and Cummings (1997) concluded from their case study research on schools attempting to integrate workplace learning with mainstream curriculum and teaching as follows.

“There was little evidence to show that teachers of general education - in either the middle or the senior years of schooling - were taking on board feedback from students and teachers in relation to their perceptions of structured workplace learning. The clear messages concerning students' preferred learning styles - which included being given responsibility, working on 'real problems', being allocated varied tasks, being treated as adults, having a chance to show initiative/take risks - appeared to fall on deaf ears. While a common universal retort of students is that school is 'boring', in these case studies - when encouraged to explain why - they frequently referred to being talked at and directed, working from work sheets or the board, doing the same things over and over again, being treated like little children, and having to conform and to mask any form of difference from other students” (Carbines and Cummings, 1997).

Our evaluation of the VCAL trial pilot reinforced this conclusion of Carbines and Cummings and, in addition, identified the concept of 'youth-oriented teaching approaches' that drew on the understandings from andragogy and the student support practices of successful teachers of young people. A general 'skills base' for teachers involved in the delivery of VCAL units included VCAL soft skills or those personal qualities that determine the character of the student/teacher relationships through which specific professional inputs can be negotiated and from which the impact of these negotiations on the decisions students make about their learning is influenced in a positive direction.

This development of a 'youth-oriented pedagogy' was seen by the evaluation team to be particularly important in the areas of literacy, numeracy and employability skills development.

While supporting the conclusion of Carbines and Cummings (1997) as a general observation, we found that secondary schools are typically neither equipped nor resourced to address effectively the learning needs of young people in the post-compulsory years with lower levels of achievement in literacy and numeracy. The

1 In summary, a learning program structured according to adult learning principles (andragogy) would include, as key elements, the following features:

- the program is experience-based in its orientation;
- the program facilitates learner-directedness and learner-centredness;
- the program activities are relevant with immediacy of application and are therefore action oriented;
- the program promotes iterative problem solving and the resolution of contradictions;
- the program encourages adaptive behaviours through transactions between the learner and their environment; and

a learning outcome of the program is knowledge creation for the adult learner.

difficulty for schools is that of addressing these students' learning difficulties in literacy and numeracy in such a way that enables progression to further learning and to the world of work. Established adult literacy approaches, including integration of literacy development with relevant vocational and social goals for the students, have shown promising results with VCAL students at the TAFE pilot sites and for schools that 'outsourced' this teaching to the TAFE or ACE sectors. The opportunity exists, through VCAL, for schools to explore directly youth-oriented literacy and numeracy programs within an applied learning curriculum context informed by the extensive experience of adult educators in this field.

Similarly, the development of employability skills for VCAL students required innovative approaches on the part of schools. A starting point here is accepting, on the part of the teachers, the necessity of viewing employability skills development of young people from a different perspective to that which arises solely from a 'school subject' orientation. New teaching approaches are required to facilitate the learning associated with the complexity of the developments occurring at a personal level when young people acquire, over time, the breadth of attitudes and behaviours typically grouped under the term 'employability skills'. These associated attitudes and behaviours are much more than 'technical' or 'instrumental' competencies that students adopt and express as required. Although clearly, there is the requirement to understand when to behave in certain ways as an effective employee, there is a greater depth to workplace learning than simple role adoption as could be the message some young people may pick up from employability skills development units delivered in isolation from direct connections to actual workplaces. Once again, adult learning orientations on the part of teachers is most likely to be helpful in these teaching/learning situations.

Conclusion

The evaluation of the VCAL trial pilot in 2002 identified the potential for the application of adult learning principles in the development of new 'pedagogies for young people' enrolled in applied learning courses at senior secondary schools and in TAFE institutes. This is thought to be particularly the case with the teaching of youth literacy and numeracy, and with the development of young people's employability skills. We also claim that the challenge for schools and TAFE institutes will be in accommodating applied and vocationally oriented learning courses for young people in ways that make a significant break with past institutional practices and norms. The degree of organisational and professional change required as these institutions embark on the development and delivery of applied learning programs for youth that are of high quality, as judged by the students themselves, employers and the community in general, should not be underestimated.

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