

DEVELOPING AN EFFECTIVE MODEL FOR DELIVERY AND ASSESSMENT FOR VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING IN COMMUNITY SERVICES

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Abstract

This paper targets practical applications for Vocational Education and Training (VET) teachers practicing in the area of Community Services around the theme of VET as an agent of change. The paper is a result of an action research project conducted to develop a model to reflect 21st Century directions for VET practice in Australia for the Diploma of Community Welfare Work. The research found that specific aspects of delivery and assessment of the course could be improved. The paper gives an outline of the delivery and assessment processes developed to incorporate:

- The workplace as the primary site for learning, skill development and assessment;
- Authentic learning tasks as a basis for learning; and
- Peer learning.

This paper outlines the process whereby groups of students were placed within industry projects in order to achieve eight units of competence broadly based around community development. It also outlines delivery and assessment methods, which were designed around the units of competence and around the particular needs of the industry projects. The paper outlines a number of findings arising from the research project.

Introduction

This report is based on my experience of teaching in the Diploma of Community Welfare Work Course in the Community Services Section of the Community Services Faculty at Newcastle Campus, Hunter Institute, TAFE NSW. Late in 2008 the Section was approached by 2 community service organizations looking to develop greater links with TAFE and TAFE Diploma students. The organizations were a neighbourhood centre and the Hunter Council of Social Services (HCOSS), which is a peak body representing community services in the Hunter region.

Teachers in the section welcomed the innovation to incorporate more ‘real’ work into the course and redeveloped delivery and assessment strategies for this purpose. As co-coordinator, I worked with seven other teachers towards an integrated and work based delivery and assessment approach, designed around the units of competence and the

particular needs of the organisations.

The units of competence involved were:

- Develop and implement a community development strategy;
- Undertake research activities;
- Develop, implement and promote effective communication techniques;
- Coordinate the work environment;
- Undertake systems advocacy;
- Develop new networks;
- Implement OH&S policies and procedures;
- Workplace learning III (part 1).

Students chose one of four industry projects. Two projects were based with HCOSS. One of these was focused on homelessness in the Hunter and the other focused on social inclusion. The other two projects were based with a neighbourhood centre. One of these projects dealt with safety of people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in the local community and the other focused on the potential for expanding a new service in the area.

Literature review

According to the recent Review of Higher Education by the Australian Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, (2008, p. xi), “Australia faces a critical moment in the history of higher education.” It states that, “If we are to maintain our high standard of living, underpinned by a robust democracy and a civil and just society, we need an outstanding, internationally competitive higher education system.” In a very broad sense, higher education is seen as essential to maintaining the quality of our way of life and democratic values. However, according to the review, relative to other countries, “Australia is losing ground”. It is apparent that “We need to turn the rhetoric of lifelong learning into a reality” (Department of Education, Employment & Workplace Relations, 2008, p. xii).

In 2008, the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) commissioned consultants to examine characteristics, and find examples of innovative teaching and learning practice in Australia and Europe. The resulting report outlined key messages for the regeneration of professional VET practice in Australia. Key messages included: “using authentic learning tasks as the basis for learning; encouraging peer learning; ... using the workplace as the primary site for learning and

skill development.” (Figgis, 2008, p. 3). Authentic learning tasks were described as real world, complex tasks that are completed over a sustained period of time. Figgis went on to state “it must be acknowledged that teaching through authentic tasks ... makes new and challenging demands on practitioners”. She recognized the need for students and teachers to adapt to new directions in VET and that the process might take many attempts before it worked “relatively predictably”.

In the TAFE NSW Hunter Institute Community and Industry 2007 Report, the Institute Director, stated, “the institute recognizes the need for an innovative and responsive outlook which parallels our increasingly technologically driven and progressive society”. As well as being in line with the key trends outlined above, this is also consistent with the proposed vision for TAFE NSW in the 21st Century (NSW DET, 2008, p.5), which “envisages TAFE NSW Institutes working actively with people in the local communities and markets they serve with maximum flexibility, committed to delivering innovative services to individuals, enterprises and industry and contributing to the social and economic development of their region.”

The messages identified for regeneration of VET practice in Australia and the subsequent vision for TAFE NSW and the Hunter Institute, have led my teaching to using a constructivist approach. In other traditional learning theories, the student is more of a passive learner with learning not integrated to the degree that it is with constructivism (Bruner, 1973).

As previously identified, my students were primarily learning on the job and were learning largely through dialogue and working collaboratively. These are features identified by Merriam et al (2007) as being part of constructivism. Figgis (2008, p.10), states “The trend to base a significant portion of the learning of a particular unit/units on the completion of an authentic task has been driven by several factors. The most important is that the approach follows logically from the constructivist view of learning.”

My students worked in a collaborative manner and communication was an integral component of their learning, to the extent that they negotiated with teachers around assessments, workshop topics and evaluation methods. My main role was to facilitate and support the student’s learning rather than to “teach” in the traditional sense. Learning was largely self-directed, with students having a large degree of control over their project and the ability to consult a range of people in project decision-making.

Research Method

The research was done through an action research process. The action research model allowed a reflective process, encompassing phases of initial reflection, planning, action, observation and reflection. Action research requires that all people involved in these phases be consulted in the process (Kember and Kelly, 1993). This tied in well

and enhanced the learning and assessment process; as communication, advocacy and community development were essential competencies to achieve and high levels of communication and consultation were necessary to achieve them. As such, the learning reflected the essence of the action research process.

Initial reflection occurred with written evaluations from students from the previous year and at meetings between teachers who had taught the units previously. From these meetings, plans were developed for how to run the course, using a proposed new integrated approach. When students started back at the beginning of semester, the plans were put into action. Observation happened from this time, and these observations informed reflections which were both informal and which were also scheduled formally at regular fortnightly teacher meetings and with students during class.

Formal evaluation occurred at the end of the project and was based on parameters set by both students and teachers. Students were consulted about what needed to be evaluated and what methods should be used. This consultation happened midway through the project in a workshop on evaluation. From this workshop, evaluation parameters were discussed and recommended and then developed by a group of students who chose to work on developing evaluation instruments and processes. This work was an example of an authentic learning task that was an integral part of the learning and assessment process.

It was decided to collect both qualitative and quantitative information from students, teachers and involved workplace organizations. Quantitative information would be collected in the form of a questionnaire and qualitative information would come from small group discussion and then general discussion around common themes. During the evaluation period, students and teachers met separately to discuss what worked, what did not work and strategies for improvement. They then came together to discuss common themes and to celebrate the successful completion of the projects.

Findings and Discussion

Van Merriënboer (2007, p. 73), states, “A common complaint of students is that they experience the curriculum as a disconnected set of courses, with implicit relationships between courses and unclear relevance to their future profession.” This project integrated learning and assessment so that learners would be able to apply their knowledge broadly in future work situations. Learning involved one day per week at the workplace and an additional two half-days attending formal workshops in the TAFE classroom, relating to specific elements of competence that were relevant to the workplace projects at the time. At the workplace, students worked broadly as a group and focused on “real” research and community development projects for the organization. Student groups ranged in size from 5-10 members.

Four teachers were responsible for delivery of workshop material relating to specific units. These teachers also worked on a roster supporting students in the workplace and being responsible for assessing students on the unit they had delivered.

A broad assessment framework was drawn from elements of competence from the units. These elements were then developed into assessments that related to tasks that were either essential to complete for project work or required reflective thought processes to analyse learning. As such, assessments were related to the competencies and to the work that the students were undertaking with their chosen community organization.

Both delivery and assessment were based on using authentic learning tasks. The overall consensus by both students and teaching staff was that this experience of incorporating authentic learning and assessment tasks in a peer learning, industry based situation had great benefits to student learning.

Students and teachers agreed that the small group dynamic worked and that a substantial amount of peer learning had occurred. Both groups also felt that there was a development in student confidence and competence and that the 'real work' situation increased positive outcomes for students.

On the negative side, students and teachers agreed that there were too many teachers involved in the support and assessment process. There was general agreement that this resulted in difficulties in communication, doubling up on information given and inconsistency of messages received by the students regarding project direction and assessment. There was also agreement that the assessment was confusing regarding the content required and which teacher was responsible for marking.

It is important to reflect on the above findings and to plan how to incorporate the knowledge into future similar projects.

Importance of planning, consistency and communication with teachers and students around facilitation and assessments

A great deal of thought, consultation and planning was put into the industry projects and assessments before they got underway. Processes for communication between teachers were developed, organisations were consulted and industry projects were proposed.

Individual teachers were allocated responsibility for delivering and assessing each unit. Throughout the project, a lot of work was put into effective communication between

these teachers; however, inconsistency of communication and teacher expectations was apparent throughout. Although there was regular email and telephone contact between teachers and teachers met every fortnight to discuss issues and to try to ensure that there was consistency for the students, problems occurred. In an effort to be consistent and transparent regarding specific elements of individual units being assessed, a great deal of information was provided to students.

In Week 8 (of the total 18 week program), the student group discussed their concerns in the planned weekly workshop and decided that they would ask for a meeting with the coordinator the following week. This meeting was organised and facilitated by the students. Students were encouraged to outline their concerns and to discuss possible strategies for improvement. Major areas of concern were:

- Assessments - The students felt that teachers did not have clear direction and were confused about the assessments. As a result the students said that they were receiving mixed messages. They also expressed difficulty understanding the assessment matrix, which outlined due dates and teachers responsible for marking. They felt that the pure bulk of information was overwhelming and confusing. (The evidence/ assessment guide was a 19-page document, outlining units, elements of competencies, performance criteria, and essential evidence and had room for comments, discussions and marks.)
- Structure – Students felt general confusion around the structure and stated that there had not been enough notes from workshops and that by having a very hands-on approach, only one learning style (kinesthetic) had been catered for.
- Skills Training - The students felt that they needed more training in specific skills e.g. peer supervision.

A number of strategies were proposed. Recommendations for changes were made and as a result a number of alterations were made to the structure, delivery and assessment. Recommendations included:

- That the assessment matrix be reworked identifying one teacher to mark each assessment;
- That assessments be clarified and explained succinctly (in written form);
- That the workshop timetable coincide with assessments due; and
- That students receive more handouts with workshops.

The students reported at the time and later that they felt “listened to” and empowered by this process.

Importance of networking with industry

Hillier (2009, p. 9) emphasizes the importance of networking, stating “The most fruitful paths to innovation ... are through contact with employers and by collaboration and networking and by establishing ... initiatives that reflect the changing work environment.”

Networking with industry is of huge importance for successful innovation, ensuring the relevance of learning and acquiring appropriate student projects. The industry projects involved with this research became possible because of TAFE’s sustained involvement over a period of years with industry in the local area. Local organizations became familiar with individual teachers, TAFE processes and the possibilities for developing partnerships. Specific TAFE/industry connections that we used to develop the student projects included teacher presence on the Board of Hunter Council of Social Services, links with part time teachers who were working in the industry and broad industry connection within the teaching section. Continued industry involvement and connection is vital in addressing new directions for VET practice in Australia.

Importance of surrendering a large level of control

Figgis (2008, p.12) states, “The most difficult challenge in teaching through authentic tasks, by all accounts, is surrendering control. You are still responsible for the specified competencies and learning outcomes, but you are turning the process – the journey by which it’s accomplished – over to these not-yet-competent people.”

As part of the action research process, I have had to be able to be flexible in all things – delivery and assessment methods, processes, communication methods, and industry project direction. Although I have maintained flexibility, I have had to ensure that the competencies are still being met and assessed appropriately. To a large level, I have had to surrender control.

Although sometimes being tempted, I tried to not personalise issues if they did not go according to plan and I tried to not see problems as an attack on my competence or myself. This was particularly testing half way through the semester, as previously discussed, when I had to force myself to be objective with dealing with student concerns and to not see the concerns as an attack on my planning and hard work. Rather than becoming defensive, I forced myself to see the students as having valid points that needed to be dealt with. The result of surrendering this control and not personalising issues was more creative win-win outcomes.

Importance of peer learning

Each learner had different skills. As projects progressed, teachers noted that those who had previously lacked confidence and who had been minimal class contributors became more confident and competent. Peer learning was seen to be a major contributor to this, as students relied on each other for various skills development.

Summarising the above findings, it was found that:

1. Clear information needs to be given up front to the students, describing the projects they will be involved with, timelines and assessments;
2. One facilitator/assessor should be responsible for each industry project rather than for each unit or competence;
3. True flexibility needs to be maintained throughout the teaching/assessing process with the ability to look at alternatives;
4. Peer learning needs to be maintained as an integral part of the integrated workplace delivery and assessment process.

Conclusion

The major issue this paper has addressed is the need to develop an effective model of delivery and assessment for specific units within the Diploma of Community Welfare Work to incorporate new directions of VET practice in Australia, specifically through increased and effective:

- Use of the workplace as the primary site for learning, skill development and assessment;
- Use of authentic learning tasks as a basis for learning;
- Peer learning.

Throughout this project, the evidence suggests that in order to develop effective assessment and delivery processes, the key to success is planning and flexibility. A teacher aiming to incorporate the above new proposed directions of VET practice in Australia must be very adaptable, must be able to not personalize difficulties that will occur, must be able to surrender a large degree of power and must above all, be flexible.

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