

The understandings about learners and learning that are imparted in Certificate IV level courses for VET teachers and trainers

Michele Simons and Erica Smith

Abstract

Much of the literature on Vocational Education and Training (VET) professional development for teachers and trainers in Australia has been descriptive, outlining the development, construction and outcomes of a range of initiatives or analysing the nature and extend of initial and on-going professional development for teacher sand trainers. There has been little critical analysis of curricula which led to the attainment what has been the most common Australian initial VET teacher/trainer qualification - the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, either in terms of the intended or enacted curricula as it was delivered in many hundreds of locations across Australia. This paper addresses this gap. It presents the outcomes of research that examined ways in which learners and processes of learning were constructed, understood and embedded in the delivery of the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training (AWT). This qualification was delivered from 1998 until November 2006. In late 2004 a new Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA) was introduced, but there was a 'teach-out period' of two years on the old qualification. The study involved 16 case studies of registered training organisations that delivered the Certificate IV in AWT. The paper updates the study by examining how the changes associated with the new qualification may affect understandings of learners and learning.

Introduction

The Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training was the base level qualification for vocational education and training (VET) teachers for a period of eight years of rapid growth and change in the VET sector in Australia – from

1998 until 2006. It can therefore be assumed to have played a significant role in affecting the quality of teaching and learning in the Australian VET sector. The possession of the qualification was mandated after 2001 for those who delivered VET qualifications, through the provisions of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). As part of the AQTF's quality requirements for training providers (known as Registered Training Organisations or RTOs), teachers were required to hold a Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training, although there was a provision for unqualified teachers to work under the supervision of qualified teachers. The AQTF was introduced in 2001 (Australian National Training Authority [ANTA] 2001) and revised in 2005, when the requirement for the Certificate IV was retained.

It is interesting in itself that such a low level of qualification was mandated for VET teachers. While the Australian Qualifications Framework states that a Certificate IV qualification requires performance of 'a range of non-routine and complex operations', it nevertheless sits below Diplomas and Advanced Diplomas which 'prepare candidates for self-directed application of skills and knowledge based on fundamental principles and/or complex techniques' (AQFAB 2007, p.8-9). As Seddon (2008) has pointed out, other educational sectors in Australia and other VET sectors in other countries require degree-level qualifications for teachers. However, the introduction of a mandated Certificate IV qualification could justifiably be seen as an improvement on the previous situation, which was that no qualification was mandated. Although a number of Australian universities offered and still offer degree programs in VET teaching (Smith forthcoming), many VET practitioners had not undertaken formal studies in vocational pedagogies, as opposed to their discipline areas. Therefore for some teachers, the Certificate IV program, which grew from earlier Workplace Assessor and Train the Trainer courses, often represented the formal introduction of certificated studies in teaching and learning.

Given that the delivery of the mandated qualification is central for VET quality and for a shared understanding of issues of teaching and learning in the VET sector, it is unfortunate that there has been little broad-based empirical research undertaken about this qualification. Early research examined the acceptance of the Certificate IV qualification (Gillis, Griffin, Catts, & Falk 1998) and critiqued the relevance of the qualification where training only forms one part of a work role, particularly in non-educational settings (Harris, Simons & Bone 2000). When the Certificate IV began to be revised, successive reports were produced as the result of national consultations in the VET sector, by the body responsible at that time for the qualification, the National Assessors and Workplace Trainers' body¹. The reports produced during the review (eg NAWT 2001) indicated that the quality of delivery of the qualification was not high, as well as indicating some difficulties with the content of the qualification. Other smaller scale studies also suggested that the quality of delivery of the Certificate IV in AWT appeared to be low (Smith 2005; Bateman & Dyson 2003).

A revised qualification, the Certificate IV in Training & Assessment, was approved in late 2004 after several years of national consultations. This qualification began to be taught from early 2005 although was not widely delivered until 2006; 'teach-out- of the 'old' Certificate IV was allowed until the end of 2006. The implications of the new qualification, and of a revised AQTF in 2007, for the study are discussed at the end of this paper.

In the rather thin research on the old Certificate IV, one particular aspect which has not been addressed has been how ideas about learners and learning are presented in the units of competency and programs that lead to the attainment of the Certificate IV qualification. This topic is important as it informs the practices of teachers and trainers. These practices are likely to have subsequent consequential impact on the attainment of quality in the VET sector and the experiences of learners. It is not only the content of the qualifications (as represented in the units of competency contained within it) but also their interpretation and implementation by teachers and trainers delivering Certificate IV courses that impact on the understandings that graduates from these courses take into their work as teachers and trainers.

This paper reports on a study designed to gather data to address this identified gap in the literature. The goal of the study was to explore the ways in which learners and the process of learning are constructed, understood and embedded in courses (learning strategies) leading to the attainment of the Certificate in Assessment and Workplace Training. The study aimed to:

- examine understandings of learning and characteristics of learners as they were represented in documentation (the Training Package in Assessment and Workplace Training within which the Certificate IV was included) and learning strategies, represented in RTOs' own documentation, leading to the attainment of the Certificate IV (the intended curriculum);
- analyse ways in which a selected group of teachers and trainers delivering the Certificate IV understand learning and the characteristics of learners and how this is conveyed in their courses (the *delivered* curriculum); and
- analyse understandings of learners and learning held by a group of recent graduates from Certificate IV courses (the *received* curriculum).

Background to the Study

Learning within the VET sector is concerned with developing competence in workplace performance and is facilitated within particular contexts. In Australia, these are TAFE Institutes (the public providers of VET), other registered training organisations and workplaces. The culture of VET in Australia is generally industry-focused. Learning in VET in Australia is underpinned by a competency-based framework which provides a schema for integrating key aspects of the curriculum such as content, delivery, assessment and outcomes. These are presented primarily in Training Packages which contain units of competency, qualification structures and assessment guidelines (Smith & Keating 2003). While there have been many criticisms of the competency-based framework, in fact teaching methods may be quite flexible and broad in nature, and learners and learning can be understood in a variety of ways.

In addition to the many theories that can be found in the literature (behaviourist, cognitivist, humanistic, social and constructivist), 'commonsense' understandings of learning contain some blending of the notion of learning as a 'process' and learning as 'product' (Merriam & Caffarella 1999, p.250; Tight 2002, p.23). Hager (2004) observed that most educational policy adopts the 'learning-as-product view' even though there are several well documented problems with this position (Hager 2004, p.6; Tight 2002, p.26). The 'learning-as-product' perspective assumes learning can be codified and then easily passed to learners. In addition it tends to emphasise an individualised notion of learning which sits in stark contrast with what is known about the social nature of learning (Jarvis 1987) and the work of researchers such as Lave and Wenger (1991) whose work describes communities of practice as sites for learning.

Learning literature in VET is also notable for its emphasis on the 'adult' nature of many learners (although many VET learners are in their teenage years). The work of Malcolm Knowles (1990) with its emphasis on 'andragogy' has attracted a lot of attention as a means for distinguishing learning in the sector from that of schools. Andragogy rests largely on two beliefs, namely that 'knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner' and 'learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration and transformation of ones 'experiential world' (Pratt 1993, p.17). These ideas however, do not take account of more recent understandings of learning which acknowledge its situated nature. The veracity of claims associated with it as a peculiarly 'adult' explanation of learning has also been raised (Merriam 1993; Tight 2002). Arguably there are also some unresolved tension between the autonomy of adult learners, as espoused in andragogy, and the outcomes that are required to be 'delivered' by providers of education (a particularly salient issue in an industry-led VET system). Other related thinking associated with andragogy and learning in VET include ideas related to self directed learning, lifelong learning and experiential learning. These have been operationalised in specific ways in Australian VET so

that, while the broader concepts do not seem to fit well with competency-based training, their specific application is not inconsistent with a competency-based system.

The concept of self-directed learning can be understood in a number of ways. It can be viewed as a self-initiated process of learning that stresses the ability of individuals to plan and manage their own learning. The term is also used to describe an attribute or characteristic of learners with personal autonomy as its hallmark. More narrowly, self-directed learning can be understood as a way of organising instruction in formal settings that allows greater learner control (Caffarella 1993, pp.25-26). Such 'self-paced' learning has been one common feature of competency-based training in Australia.

Lifelong learning has become a key catch phrase in VET and is used to promote several key ideas. It is central to the ideal that learning should be a continuous process across the life cycle and a necessary pre-condition if individuals (and organisations) are to develop. In Australian VET this translates to the availability of qualifications to people of all ages and in many settings including through employment. Experiential learning rests on the notion that the act of reflection on experience is central to understanding how experience is transformed into knowledge. This is perhaps best exemplified by the work of Kolb (1984) and his experiential learning cycle which has been the catalyst for a body of work on learning styles or preferences. The concept of experiential learning is closely linked to the notion of recognition of prior learning (RPL) which acknowledges that many adults have prior knowledge, understandings and skills which should be recognised in a formal sense (Tight 2002, p.107). In competency-based systems such as the Australian system there are formalised methods for assessing prior knowledge, or current competence as it is more exactly known.

Related to these ideas about learning are concepts associated with understanding the characteristics of learners likely to be encountered in the VET context. Cranton provides a useful framework for analysing learner characteristics and their implications for teaching and learning (Cranton 1992, p.20). Firstly, there are those characteristics which are relatively stable, but are likely to impact on the process of learning. These include characteristics such as personality type, culture, philosophy and developmental phase. Secondly, there are those characteristics which themselves are influenced by, but also influence the learning process. These include learning style, autonomy, values, experience, developmental stage and self-directedness (Cranton 1992, p.21). Arguably it is those characteristics that are likely to affect the learning process that should be the focus of efforts by teachers and trainers, since these can have 'flow-on' effects for other learner traits such as motivation (Wlodkowski 1999) or persistence (Mackinnon-Slaney 1994).

It would be expected, therefore, that any programs addressing the development

of teachers and trainers for the VET sector would include learning opportunities which developed an understanding of these various groups of learner characteristics and their potential impact on learning processes, which has been well documented (eg Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone 2004). Teacher-training programs may also be expected to address major learning theories and ongoing developments worldwide in thinking about learning.

Alongside this wide array of understandings related to learners and learning, the notion of 'curriculum' is highly contested in the field of education generally and, more specifically, in the VET sector. As mentioned briefly above, this sector now operates under a regime where Training Packages are the central organising framework (Smith 2001, p.2); 'curriculum documents' as previously understood may not necessarily still be utilised. Teachers and trainers are at liberty (within the parameters sent by the training providers which employ them) to devise appropriate learning and assessment experiences for their learners so long as the units of competency are achieved. Broader understandings of curriculum, while still emphasising the notion of planned learning experiences, expand the concept to include all those experiences that arise from the implementation of curricula (Print 1993, p.9). Within the context of VET where Training Packages are used, curricula arise out of the interactions between the Training Package, learners and the teachers/trainers rather than necessarily being formal documents. Such interactions can occur in a variety of contexts including educational institutions, workplaces and training rooms. Importantly, the same applies for delivery of the qualification for teachers and trainers itself, the subject of this paper.

Training Packages are not 'permitted', according to the rules on their development, to contain advice about teaching the units and qualifications (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2008). However, Training Packages are not totally silent on issues related to the teaching and learning processes. Guidance on teaching and learning strategies is included in the publicly funded 'support materials' provided for many Training Packages, to assist with delivery and assessment (Smith & Keating 2003, p.154). Such materials were available for the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training itself. Moreover, deductions about 'acceptable' teaching methods may be made from the assessment guidelines in the Training Package. For example, a requirement that assessment of a unit must be made in the workplace implies that some training delivery should be in the workplace and/or that a work placement must be provided. In a broader sense, critiques of the implicit pedagogical assumptions contained in Training Packages have suggested that by their very structure they promote a transmission understanding of learning. In this way they may miss contemporary understandings that view competence as contextually bounded and not residing in individuals but in the collective (the interaction between people at work) (Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes & Solomon 2003, p.20-21). All of these issues form sophisticated and contested

underpinnings of teaching practice, particularly when set alongside with the relatively low qualification level of the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training which may be the only pedagogical qualification that VET teachers undertake.

Research Method

The purpose of the study was to explore how the concepts of learners and learning are embedded in the intended curriculum, the delivered curriculum and the received curriculum (Glatthorn cited in Print 1993, pp. 3-4) of the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training. Different perspectives – including those of the teachers and trainers implementing the course and graduates from the various courses – were required.

Firstly the Training Package in Assessment and Workplace Training was analysed, to confirm the units delivered in the Certificate IV and to inspect in detail the content of the two units related to teaching/training delivery.

Secondly, field data were collected using a case study approach across sixteen sites during late 2004. The sites were designed to provide a variety of RTO types, and included public and private training providers as well as higher education institutions which were also registered training organisations. The 16 sites were located in four different states/territories. Fourteen were based solely in the VET sector and for two of the higher education institution, the Certificate IV was embedded in degree programs in adult education or vocational education and training, a not uncommon form of delivery of the qualification. Table 1 gives detailed information about each of the cases.

Table 1: Distribution of case studies by State or Territory, and number of respondents at each site

State	Location	RTO Type	Number of interviews at site
South Australia	City	Community	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	City	Public	1 teacher and 2 graduates
New South Wales	Regional	Public	2 teachers and 2 graduates
	City	Public	1 teacher and 1 graduate
	Regional	Community	2 teachers and 2 graduates
	City	Enterprise	1 teacher and 2 graduates
Queensland	City	Government	1 teacher and 1 graduate
	Regional	Commercial	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	Regional	Public	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	City	Public	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	City	Community	1 teacher and 1 graduate
Victoria	City	Commercial	1 teacher and 1 graduate
	City	Public	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	Regional	Public	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	City	Enterprise	1 teacher and 2 graduates
	Regional	Government	1 teacher and 1 graduate

For each case study, interviews were conducted with at least one teacher and/or trainer involved in the delivery of Certificate IV programs and preferably two recent graduates from their courses (in a small number of cases only one graduate could be accessed). As the Training Package, at least in part, established the intended curriculum for the Certificate IV qualification, the protocols were designed to collect data on the *delivered* curriculum from a number of Certificate IV courses (through the experiences of teachers and trainers who offer the course) and the *received* curriculum – what graduates from the Certificate IV courses report as their learning from participating in the courses. The protocols were circulated amongst the research team for comment and were tested with a small number of potential respondents. Minor amendments were made to the protocols as a result of these processes.

The interview protocols focused on the following areas:

For teachers/trainers

- Information about the RTO and the way in which it delivered the Certificate IV;
- Information about the teacher/trainer and his/her teaching qualifications and experience with the Certificate IV;
- Questions about his/her views of learning and learners; and
- Questions about how he/she teaches Certificate IV participants about learning.

For graduates of the Certificate IV program:

- Information about the interviewee;
- Questions about how the Certificate IV was delivered;
- Questions about his/her views of learning and learners;
- Questions about what and how he/she learned about learning and learners;
- Questions about implementation of this with his/her own learner group(s); and
- Recommendations about improvements to the Certificate IV.

Across the sixteen sites, a total of 18 interviews were conducted with teachers and trainers who delivered the Certificate IV course and 27 interviews with graduates of the course.

Findings

Teachers and trainers delivering the Certificate IV

The persons delivering the Certificate IV programs were a highly qualified and experienced group of educators. With the exception of one participant who was completing an undergraduate degree in adult and vocational education at the time, all already held either degrees or post graduate qualifications in education. Over half the group held secondary teaching qualifications and the remainder specific qualifications in adult and vocational education. All in addition held the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training as this was a requirement to deliver the course. Three participants were currently undertaking studies at Masters Level and another person was undertaking certificate level studies in on-line learning from an institution in the United Kingdom. In addition to their qualifications in education and training, eight participants were anxious to mention their industry experience and the vocational qualifications which they held in addition to their educational qualifications. Nine of the respondents had more than ten years experience as a teacher.

The Certificate IV graduates

The graduates from the Certificate IV programs were a diverse group, both in terms of their educational backgrounds and their current work roles. Just under one quarter of graduates (six in total) were currently employed in public vocational education and training providers. Two of this group were employed as teachers, one as a VET coordinator, one as a support officer for teachers working in flexible delivery, one as a short course administrator and one as an internal auditor. Five graduates were employed in teaching/tutoring roles in community based organisations and the remaining graduates occupied a range of work roles including marketing, various roles in the health sector, manufacturing industry and business owners. Just over 40% of the Certificate IV graduates held graduate and post graduate level qualifications. A further 40% held vocational qualifications and almost all listed a diverse range of occupational experience.

The intended curriculum

The Certificate IV in Assessment & Workplace Training contained eight units of competency:

- BSZ401A Plan assessment
 - BSZ402A Conduct assessment
 - BSZ403A Review assessment
 - BSZ404A Train small groups
 - BSZ405A Plan and promote a training program
 - BSZ406A Plan a series of training sessions
 - BSZ407A Deliver training sessions
 - BSZ 408A Review training
- (Australian National Training Authority, 1998, p.24)

Units BSZ404A *Train small groups* and BSZ407A *Deliver training sessions* are those where one might expect learning theories to be addressed. In the 'Required knowledge and skills' section of the units, BSZ 404A has no relevant requirements, and BSZ407A contained only the items 'Understanding of the principles of adult learning and competency based training as applied to the target group and client' along with 'awareness of language literacy and numeracy issues and principles'. The publicly-funded support materials referred to learning theories only in a cursory manner. Learning materials developed by some providers added this 'missing link', usually by reference back to the reading provided in the adult learning courses undertaken by the teaching staff when they were undertaking their own university courses in VET or adult learning. However not all providers developed, or gave to learners, such additional material.

It was assumed by many providers that many of those undertaking the

Certificate IV would be awarded the qualification partly through RPL, and that for those units that were 'studied', that much of the learning would take place 'on the job'. Therefore the hours allocated for delivery were often quite low, despite the fact that the qualification had recommended 'nominal delivery hours' (Smith & Keating 2003, p.153) of approximately 300 hours. Typically the qualification was delivered weekly over six months or one year for one evening a week, or over several weekends. Thus the amount of content that could be taught was necessarily compressed.

The delivered and received curricula in relation to learning

Teachers and trainers delivering Certificate IV courses and their graduates alike asserted that that nature of learning promoted in VET should be 'workplace focussed'. Learning was characterised as 'practical', 'hands on' and that it should be learner-centred, interactive and acknowledge learners' prior knowledge and skill. Learning was also largely underpinned by conceptions of a split between thinking and doing and the view that learning was a 'product' (that is, competencies) that people attained through transmission from teacher to learner.

Teachers and trainers responsible for the delivery of the Certificate IV generally reported that definitions of learning were not offered in their courses. Where they might have been offered, for example through supplementary reading provided to learners, they do not appear to have made any significant impact on most graduates. There were some exceptions, for instance in a NSW public provider which delivered Cert IV in AWT to many well-qualified technical staff in a government department, the teacher said:

"They want to know the outcomes of what someone else has done, of research into the psychology of learning. Give me some things I can work with, tell me. Give me some strategies and some methods."

There was some agreement across both groups of respondents that the focus of the Certificate IV course was not on learning but training, and hence discussions about learning were not highly relevant. Where learning was examined in Certificate IV courses, behaviourist and humanistic understandings were most prevalent, with little evidence of any significant attention to constructivist or other more advanced understandings of learning.

However, many teachers and trainers offering the Certificate IV placed significant emphasis on modelling actions which enabled their students to experience learning of a particular type. These experiences were characterised as adult-like, where drawing on the experience and prior knowledge and skills of participants as well as interaction between participants were key components. While it was not possible to assess the full impact of these processes from interviews, it is clear that this modelling had a significant impact on graduates. The graduates

recounted instances where these teaching tools had been deployed; for example where a teacher came into their class and deliberately taught 'badly', and then sought feedback about the errors that had been made. These features of learning as experiential and interactive may provide a sound basis from which notions of teaching and learning in VET might be expanded. However it was not apparent that the activities were explicitly linked to learning *theories*, rather they provided advice on 'how to teach'. On the other hand, it was commonly mentioned by graduates that they had not received much practical assistance in 'how to teach'; understanding about learning did not necessarily prepare them to be able to teach.

In one case study (the NSW regional community-based provider), graduates mentioned a significant piece of learning about the learning environment. They remembered that they had been told that learners would not learn if the room was not well lit, too hot or cold or otherwise uncomfortable. For both, this was something they had not thought about previously.

The delivered and received curricula in relation to learners

More emphasis seemed to be placed on learners than on learning processes. The message that learners in VET were a diverse group of individuals was clearly made to people undertaking Certificate IV courses. Teachers and trainers delivering programs conveyed a clear understanding of the 'differences' in the types of learners that graduates might encounter in their work. A typical response from a teacher was as follows:

"A learner is everyone ... There are going to be different characteristics of learners depending on individual motivations, skill levels ... most of the training is on the job so [trainers] would have to use some of their own guidance and intuition and respond to the way that someone is learning ... What we are doing is building awareness of different learning styles and then they are to sort of try some of those strategies and gauge the response of the learner as to how they will proceed ..."

There was little emphasis on the similarities among learners, except for some emphasis on the adult nature of learners which appeared less often in graduates' ideas of learners than it did in the ideas of teachers and trainers delivering the Certificate IV courses.

While it was clear that learners were depicted as diverse, there was less evidence however, of practical approaches to dealing with the diversity that was described. Evidence from the study suggests that while considerable efforts were made by teachers and trainers to model various teaching strategies, there appeared to be little direct instruction about these methods beyond exhortations for the need for flexibility when selecting strategies. While instruction on how to structure training sessions appears to be offered, there also appeared to be

little overt direction provided to graduates on the relationship between various teaching strategies and their suitability or otherwise for learners who held particular characteristics. A typical response from a graduate of the program (in a public provider) was:

“I think we possibly discussed that all learners have their own goals and they are there for specific reasons. I can’t remember any more.”

The outstanding exception to this was in relation to learning styles. Learning styles clearly offered a relatively simple and intuitively appealing way of addressing the characteristics of different learners and were widely discussed in the classes that learners attended. For several graduates of the Certificate IV, the notion of learning styles was the only clear thing that they could remember from their course. Teachers and trainers leading Certificate IV courses encouraged their learners to seek out their own learners’ needs and respond to them. Generally, graduates stated that the learning from their courses had reinforced the importance of accommodation, and acknowledgement of and the need for, a general awareness of various learner characteristics. The term ‘catering’ in relation to differences was often used in a non-specific way to capture the intent of these actions, alongside the notion that the courses had ‘raised awareness’ of the diversity of learners whom graduates might encounter. Graduates had clearly absorbed this message and repeated exhortations to ‘respect differences’, ‘respond and acknowledge differences’ and the ‘need to [for learners] to feel valued and made to feel part of the group’. A number of graduates recalled that matching teaching styles with learning styles was suggested as a strategy to assist in accommodating the different needs of learners. There was also a tendency to suggest that learners in VET had specific needs because they were VET learners, but these were often not specific or were sometimes the product of stereotyping – for example the different needs of adolescent learners compared with those of adults.

Discussion

Evidence from this study suggested that approaches to the delivery of Certificate IV pathways did not place significant emphasis on theoretical explorations of learning, particularly those which were in keeping with emerging research. Learning was largely viewed as a practical activity. Some of the staff delivering the Certificate IV programs described learning in ways which emphasised adult learning principles and andragogy as useful organising frameworks. This perspective was also sometimes accompanied by speculative assertions about the differences between various groups of learners – for example adults and adolescents. While these ideas were less prevalent in graduates’ perspectives of learning, they were nonetheless evident. Regrettably, on the basis of the available current literature on learning, many of these assertions would not be substantiated. Given the diversity of students who might participate in

VET, particularly adolescents, these findings arguably highlight some issues in relation to discourses and frameworks informing discussions about learners in VET and the manner in which in Certificate IV programs may serve to promote ideas which may limit teachers and trainers' understanding of learning in unhelpful ways.

Descriptions of intended curricula from Certificate IV courses, where only a few hours could be dedicated to any one particular topic, suggest that exploration of graduates' learning styles afforded a simple and often powerful way to emphasise messages relating to addressing learner differences. Unfortunately, however, these frameworks often appear to have been used uncritically, leaving open the potential for stereotyping of learners without due regard to a range of other learner characteristics which may also impact on preferred ways of learning. The evidence in this study underscores the appeal of learning styles for a sector of education where teachers and trainers are constantly exhorted to be flexible and responsive. Teachers and trainers demonstrate this flexibility and responsiveness by being learner-centred – and learning styles appears, from this study, to be one of the main vehicles by which this goal can be realised. However, as Coffield et al. (2004) note, concepts of learning styles can entrench teacher-led practices where teachers and trainers are placed in the role of diagnosticians and experts. They are required to discern learners' needs in relation to the best ways to approach the process of learning and act on this diagnosis often in time-poor settings. This approach also runs the risk of positioning learners as passive objects. It places an unrealistic and unachievable set of requirements on teachers and trainers – arguably at the expense of the need to find ways to address systemic issues relating to social, economic and other barriers to learning that might exist for specific groups of people. There is also the inherent contradiction within the structure of the VET system where learners' needs are juxtaposed with those of industry as codified in Training Packages.

Despite these shortcomings we would concur with Coffield and his colleagues (2004) and see a place for learning styles as a means of increasing learners' self-knowledge of their skills as learners and as a means of encouraging learners to discuss what might help them learn with their teachers and trainers. This however, did not appear to be the context in which discussions about learning styles were taking place within Certificate IV courses and it is debatable that, in a VET context where time pressures and other issues can seriously impact on the space available for learning, that these processes might ever be realised. There is also the additional question of the relevance and application of concepts such as learning styles which have largely been explored only in institutional settings in a sector where the workplace is considered to be the optimal site for learning – particularly where the Certificate IV itself was concerned with the development of teachers and trainers whose sites of practice were often confined to workplace settings.

Continued relevance and significance of the study

The research took place in late 2004. A new Certificate IV qualification, in Training and Assessment (TAA) was produced as a result of the review of the Training Package in Assessment and Workplace Training. This new qualification began to be taught from 2005 although was not widely delivered until 2006. The new TAA qualification includes 12 core units and two electives and has nominal delivery hours of 255-305 (Office of Training & Tertiary Education 2005). The twelve core units are:

TAAENV401A Work effectively in vocational education and training

TAAENV402A Foster and promote an inclusive learning culture

TAAENV403A Ensure a healthy and safe learning environment

TAADES401A Use Training packages to meet client needs

TAADES402A Design and develop learning programs

TAADEL401A Plan and organise group-based delivery

TAADEL404A Facilitate work-based learning

TAADEL403A Facilitate individual learning

TAAASS401A Plan and organise assessment

TAAASS402A Assess competence

TAAASS403A Develop assessment tools

TAAASS404A Participate in assessment validation

(ANTA, 2004, p.18-19)

While the qualification that was the subject of this research study has been phased out, the continuity of problems from the old (AWT) to the new (TAA) qualification mean that the relevance of this study remains. The new Certificate IV is significantly different from the old, symbolised in the reversal of 'training' and 'assessment' in the new title. But there is also a strong continuity, in the delivered curriculum, with the superseded qualification. This continuity is expressed most clearly in the fact that graduates of the former qualification receive credit transfer for several units of competency in the new qualification, despite the fact that the alignment of the units is poor. This less than satisfactory outcome as the result of a highly political exercise strongly influenced by the States and Territories that are responsible for VET delivery in Australia (Smith 2005). Consideration of the cost of upgrading the qualifications of the teaching staff in the State and Territory TAFE systems appears to have led to a wish for as little change as possible, even at the cost of losing the chance to improve the quality of teaching.

Moreover, there was no requirement in the AQTF 2005 for teachers to upgrade to the new qualification unless they changed jobs. Further revisions in 2007 of the Australian Quality Training Framework have actually 'watered down' the

requirements for a current Certificate IV, allowing RTOs to employ trainers that have either the old or the new qualification, or even staff that are 'able to demonstrate that prior to 23 November 2005 they had been able to hold equivalent competencies to the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training' (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007, p.55).

To exacerbate the continuation of problems from the old to the new qualification, there is a specific problem that relates particularly to the topic of this paper, the coverage of learners and learning in delivery of the Certificate IV. There is a new and much-improved central unit on training delivery *TAADEL402A Facilitate group-based learning*. This unit includes the following features:

- in the 'range statement' explicit reference to a list of learning principles and learner styles
- in the 'required knowledge' section, a requirement for a 'sound knowledge' of learning principles and learner styles and provision of an explicit list of these
- in the 'required knowledge' section, a requirement for an 'introductory knowledge' of learning theories with provision of an explicit list of these.

(ANTA, 2004, p.259, 263-4)

However, TAADEL402A is not a compulsory part of the new qualification; in other words it is no longer a necessary requirement that VET practitioners learn how to teach. The unit was moved from core to elective as part of the last minute political negotiations mentioned earlier (Smith 2005; Smith 2007). Moreover, the credit transfer arrangements (known as 'unit mapping') (Australian National Training Authority, 2004, p.726) allow credit for the unit for candidates that have achieved BSZ404A *Train small groups*, the central training delivery unit in the old Certificate IV - which as we have seen, contained no requirement for participants to learn about learning theory.

Furthermore, many practitioners obtaining an 'upgrade' to the new qualification apply for, and receive, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) for those units that do not attract credit transfer from the old qualification, meaning that they need not undertake any new learning to gain the new qualification (Smith 2007). They continue, in other words, to rely on their former qualification. Those receiving the new qualification primarily by credit transfer and RPL may well continue to draw from a practice base informed by ideas of learners and learning that may not be current but rather may reflect the practice as represented in the older qualification.

Finally, the teachers delivering the new qualification will not materially differ from those who were delivering the old. Although they will necessarily have

upgraded to the new Certificate IV, their knowledge base would be unlikely to have increased as they themselves would be likely to have achieved the new qualification mainly by credit transfer and RPL.

Worryingly, an early report on the implementation of the new qualification (IBSA 2006) has suggested that even where the qualification is actually taught rather than delivered through credit transfer, RPL and a small number of new units offered as an 'upgrade course', many of the previous problems remain, including poor quality of delivery, insufficient attention to the actual process of teaching, and inappropriateness for workplace trainers. While this point is outside the scope of this paper it does not suggest that great improvements are taking place compared with the practices observed during the study reported in this paper.

Conclusions

There is no doubt that the teachers and trainers charged with implementing programs leading to the attainment of the Certificate IV qualification held and conveyed strong views about teaching and learning in the VET sector. They promoted a view that graduates should be able to consider, analyse and provide for different learning styles and cater to different learner needs. A learning environment that was supportive, orientated to the needs of adult learners, interactive and experiential was also emphasised. These perspectives are amenable, in part, with emerging ideas about the social construction of knowledge. However, there was a remarkable uniformity across the case study sites which appears to suggest a lack of attention to the unique demands associated with facilitating learning within particular industries and in ways that embrace the diversity of learners in VET. Some notions of learning appeared to rest on ideas which lack the empirical basis to justify a rationale for actions to promote quality teaching and learning.

This study supports the work of previous authors such as that of Coffield et al. (2004). It alerts us to views of learners which are held as a basis for the decisions made by teachers and trainers. How teachers *think* about learners is important. Some of these views, particularly those which focus on learners' needs which must be met and which only pay attention to certain learner characteristics are less than helpful. It is important that understandings of learners take into account the situated nature of knowledge and the contexts in which learners are embedded.

One way forward rests with on-going dialogue between practitioners especially those delivering Certificate IV programs and with those engaged in research about learning and teaching. This dialogue, however, needs to extend beyond technical issues related to the implementation of the latest version of the Certificate IV qualification. Rather it needs to embrace a critical analysis of what

teaching and learning might look like that promotes genuinely inclusive learning in institutional and workplace settings alike, and the broader implications that these characteristics raise for the work of teachers and trainers in VET.

Dr Michele Simons, School of Education at the University of South Australia
Email: Michele.simons@unisa.edu.au

Professor Erica Smith is Dean of Graduate Studies at the University of Ballarat
Email: e.smith@ballarat.edu.au

References

- Australian National Training Authority 1998, *Training Package for assessment & workplace training*, ANTA: Melbourne.
- Australian National Training Authority 2004, *Training and assessment, Training Package*, ANTA: Melbourne.
- Australian National Training Authority 2001, *Standards for registered training organisations*, ANTA: Melbourne.
- Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board 2007, *Australian Qualifications Framework implementation handbook*, 4th edn, AQFAB: Melbourne
- Bateman, A & Dyson, C 2003, *Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training*,
- Office of Training and Tertiary Education: Melbourne.
- Caffarella, R 1993, 'Self-directed learning', *New directions for adult and continuing education, An update on adult learning theory*, no.57, pp.25-35.
- Chappell, C, Hawke, G, Rhodes, C & Solomon, N 2003, *An analysis of the current and future context in which Training Packages will need to operate High Level Review of Training Packages, Phase 1 Report*, ANTA: Brisbane.
- Coffield, F, Moseley, D, Hall, E & Ecclestone, K 2004, *Should we be using learning styles? What research has to say to practice*, Learning and Skills Research Centre: London.
- Commonwealth of Australia 2007, *Users' guide to the essential standards for registration*, Department of Education, Science & Training: Canberra.
- Cranton, P 1992, *Working with Adult Learners*, Wall and Emerson: Toronto.

- Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) 2008, *Training Package development handbook*, DEEWR: Canberra.
- Gillis, S, Griffin, P, Catts, R & Falk, I 1998, 'Reviewing the competency standards for assessment and workplace trainers' in, eds J McIntyre and M Barratt, *VET research: influencing policy and practice: proceedings of the first national conference of the Australian Association for Vocational Education and Training Research*.
- Hager, P 2004, 'Conceptions of learning and understanding learning at work', *Studies in Continuing Education*, vol 26, no.1, pp.3-17.
- Harris, R, Simons, M & Bone, J 2000, *More than meets the eye? Rethinking the role of workplace trainer*, National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER): Adelaide.
- Innovation and Business Skills Australia 2006, 'Continuous improvement of the Training and Assessment Training Package (TAA04): Learning from implementation experience', IBSA: Melbourne.
- Jarvis, P 1987, *Adult Learning in the Social Context*, Croom Helm: London.
- Knowles, M 1990, *The adult learner. A neglected species*, Gulf Publishing Company: Houston.
- Kolb, DA 1984, *Experiential learning: experience as a source of learning and development*, NJ, Prentice Hall: Englewood Cliffs.
- Lave J & Wenger, E 1991, *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge.
- Mackinnon-Slaney, F 1994, 'The adult persistence in learning model', *Journal of Counselling and Development*, vol 72, no.3, pp.268-275.
- Merriam, S & Caffarella, R 1999, 'Key theories in learning', *Learning in adulthood. A Comprehensive Guide*, Jossey-Bass: California.
- Merriam, S 1993, 'Adult learning: where have we come from? Where are we headed?' *New directions for adult and continuing education. An update on adult learning theory*, no.57, pp.5-14.
- National Assessors and Workplace Trainers 2001, *Review of the Training Package for Assessment and Workplace Training, Final Report Stage 1*, ANTA: Melbourne.

- Office of Training & Tertiary Education 2005, *Purchasing guide for Training and Assessment Training Package TAA40104*. OTTE: Melbourne.
- Pratt, D 1993, Andragogy after twenty-five years. *New directions for adult and continuing education, An update on adult learning theory*, no.57, pp.15-23.
- Print, M 1993, *Curriculum Development and Design*, Allen and Unwin: St Leonards.
- Seddon, T 2008, 'Crafting capacity in VET: Towards an agenda for learning and researching in the VET workforce', *VET in context: 11th Conference of the Australian VET Research Association*, Holiday Inn, Adelaide, 3-4 April.
- Smith, E (forthcoming), 'Teachers, instructors and trainers: An Australian focus', eds R McClean, DN Wilson and C Chinien, 2008, *International Handbook on Education for the World of Work*, Dordrecht, Springer: The Netherlands.
- Smith, E 2007, 'Are we throwing away the TAA?' *Campus Review*, 2 October, 14-15.
- Smith, E 2005, 'A rich tapestry: Changing views of teaching and teaching qualifications in the vocational education and training sector', *Australian Pacific Journal of Teacher Education*, vol 33, no.3, pp.339-351.
- Smith, E 2001, Training Packages: Ticky-tacky boxes or brave new workers paradise? *Knowledge Demands for the New Economy, proceedings of the 9th Annual International Conference on Post Compulsory Education and Training*, Australian Academic Press: Brisbane.
- Smith, E & Keating, J 2003, *From training reform to Training Packages*, Social Science Press: Tuggerah Lakes, NSW.
- Tight, M 2002, *Key concepts in adult education and training*, Routledge: London.
- Wlodkowski, R 1999, *Enhancing Adult Motivation to Learn*, Jossey Bass: San Francisco.

Notes:

Public RTOS were almost all TAFE (Technical and Further Education) Institutes funded by State governments. Two were also higher education providers. There was one other public provider, an agricultural college. Community RTOs were generally adult and community education (ACE) providers. Enterprise

RTOs were companies whose major function was not education but who had registered as RTOs primarily to deliver qualifications to their own employers. Government RTOs were RTOs that were part of government departments for example State Departments of Agriculture. Commercial RTOs were private training providers operating for-profit.

(Footnotes)

1 This body has now been subsumed into Innovation and Business Skills Australia (IBSA), one of ten national Skills Councils.