Avenues Other:
A limited enquiry into workplace delivery and assessment.

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Abstract #45
The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion of the practicalities, applicability, and implications, of delivering vocational qualifications in the workplace. After the initial presentation, the presenters promote discussion of the findings, and most importantly, the exploration of alternative avenues of delivery, what forms the models might take; the implications; and the issues of skill and knowledge development. In particular the focus will be how workplace delivery of VET appears to be influencing perceptions of 'trade' qualifications.

Introduction
The purpose of this paper is to promote discussion of the findings on workplace delivery. Primarily this paper unpacks the findings of interviews conducted with staff of registered training organisation as well as considering relevant methodological detail. In addition it provides insight into the questions, and responses that arose during the course of the interviews. It is intended that the interviews would provide participants with an insight into the thoughts, concerns - existing paradigm perhaps - of practitioners who are attempting to adapt their trade delivery practices to a changing industrial and social context. Further, as to why it is our belief that while all of the practices reviewed hold merit, it is to 'avenues other' than these we must look if skill development of apprentices in regional construction workplaces is to be effected.

Overview
During latter half of 2007 we (the presenters) undertook a limited enquiry into workplace delivery on behalf of TAFE NSW Riverina Institute. The purpose of the study was to investigate workplace delivery techniques appropriate or adaptable to apprenticeship training in the regional construction industry. The enquiry was supported by Reframing the Future funding.

Representatives of five Victorian based Registered Training Organisations (RTOs), both public and private, were interviewed either face to face or (in one instance only) by phone link. The organisations involved were chosen on the basis of a review of recommendations offered by independent researchers and peers within the industry. In each case it must be stated that the RTOs who participated in the study were open and forthcoming throughout the interview process, and hey were justifiably proud of their past and current activities in delivering qualifications in the workplace. We hope this work offers appropriate respect to their achievements.

Despite their enthusiasm and cooperation we have withheld the names of these RTOs and their clients. The purpose of the review being to provide representative examples of alternative practices in workplace delivery, rather than focusing upon the perceived value or otherwise of the capabilities of any particular organisation. In light of this the five RTOs have been referred to simply as Private 1, Private 2, Private 3, Public A (Country) and Public B (Inner City).

Methodology
Following discussions with numerous researchers and RTOs (both public and private), a small cluster of Victorian-based RTOs were identified as offering a range of approaches and, importantly, were open to further enquiry. We were able to visit four of the five were able to be visited allowing for face to face discussion, using an open interview approach to promote dialogue. A similar discursive technique was used in the telephone interview of the manager of the fifth RTO. The open interview technique allowed for issues and themes to arise and be discussed that had not previously been considered, while in the latter part of the discussion issues could be introduced, addressed, and brought into focus.

In each case a particular client or delivery site and qualification was identified for exemplary methods or approaches. It was not considered important that all of the organisations that participated dealt with the construction trades, instead the possibility of crossover between industries was explored.

Limits of Enquiry
- With the exception of Public A, only one representative of each RTO was interviewed. (Note: In generally the RTO representative who took part in the interview was not conducting the delivery of the qualification in focus.)
- Clients and sites where training was delivered were not visited
- Documentation employed for assessment was not reviewed
- No 'students' or 'applicants' were interviewed
- Several RTOs which deliver complete construction-based qualifications were not asked to participate due to an industry perception that they were not good practice training examples.
- Both interviewers were male.

Discussion
Detail of the findings can be found in the addendum to this brief paper (to be offered separately to conference participants). Rather than labour over each of the findings individually, it is perhaps of greater value to discuss their implication, allowing the relevant detail to rise as is relevant. Firstly, it is of interest that of the five RTOs, none of them operated similarly: Only one RTO 'delivered' training in the traditional interpretation of the word; one sought to developed the workplace, inclusive of management, as a learning community; one only assessed the training delivered by the employer; one only conducted Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) assessments of existing experienced workforces; and one actually conducted neither workplace assessment or training – although it offered appearances to that effect.

In each case it was clear to us that the representative from the RTO believed strongly in what they were attempting to do, and were doing it 'well'. Private 1, for example, engaged with several large organisations requesting skill development of their staff. Extensive efforts were then made to contextualise appropriate qualifications so as to develop skills relevant to these workplaces.

Likewise Private 2 went to great lengths to evaluate the competency or otherwise of their target group: often requiring assessors to spend whole days in road trains; meeting applicants at truck stops in the early hours of the morning; and going so far as

to instruct supervisors in training and assessment practices (partial qualification) when skill gaps arise for drivers.

In each case however there were elements that we had to confront as 'challenging' to our current delivery or training paradigm. Of these there are elements that appear to have little relevance to the establishment of 'appropriate' workplace skill and knowledge development for apprentices, and elements that, whilst still challenging, hold promise. It is appropriate that we should look at these in more detail.

Recognition of Prior Learning and Current Competencies

Both Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), and Recognition of Current Competencies (RCC) are well documented (NSW DET, 2007). Briefly, RPL is the recognition that people develop skills and knowledge informally and outside of the formal educational system. RPL effectively 'formalises' the informal – brings the applicant into the 'system' – and benchmarks them against relevant competency standards. RCC is an assessment only process whereby an applicant's competency is checked for currency. With respect to the development of skills and knowledge of apprentices, who in the main are of limited experience and have had only a short time to develop their skills in the workplace, both were perceived as avenues of limited 'initial' relevance.

That stated, RPL may have some value in the evaluation of apprentices who, having spent a significant period embedded in the workplace, are confronted with training in units of competency that they may already have developed. This is the approach that was adopted by Public A. Even here there is a cautionary note as often the practical ability is context specific, and only a limited grasp of the underpinning knowledge is held. Likewise the narrow field of experience invokes questions regarding transfer to other contexts. The applicants assessed by Public A have demonstrated this as an issue. However, Private 2 refutes this on the basis of prescribed competency. Competency, they state, "is a bench mark… …if you don't think its high enough talk to your ISC [Industry Skills Council] …". In addition, Private 2 were firm in the belief that competency was "entry level training…". The "trade" they contended was something else, developed over time, and that the general public will eventually isolate those 'tradespersons' who are not considered to be of sufficient standard.

Private 3 on the other hand, while also offering ostensibly an RPL program, seeks to develop worker's problem-solving ability. In so doing they argue that although all of the skill and knowledge development is context specific, including the language of its mostly English as a Second Language (ESOL) and Languages other than English (LOTE) applicants, they develop the key 'soft skills' that allow for transfer between contexts and problems.

Here we see two different strategies for two different goals: one enters, checks existing competency, coaches were required, and exits – the qualification delivered to the standards set by industry; the other enters the workplace seeking to develop, and raise the standard, of the whole context over time, leaving when that aim is achieved – "…we're there for as long as it takes…". It is almost as a 'bonus' that the workers achieve a qualification effectively through RPL.

Points for consideration

- If competency is considered to be entry level training only, where is the 'trade' [or higher training which is required to become an expert at the trade]? And given a generally uninformed public purchasing to a price, will they be aware that what they are receiving could be better?
- When developing the skills in a workplace using consultants who are not experienced in the context of the delivery (as occasionally Private 3 does – preferring not to use the term 'trainers'), can one be sure that the direction taken is appropriate (sustainable, economic, safe, and the like)? The incremental shifts sought are based upon, and effected by, an existing workforce of (at time of entry) unspecified competence. The key performance indicators (KPI) may look good, yet is the direction ultimately right? This does not deny the value of the alternative perspective offered, indeed it is alternative perspectives that are frequently missing in workplaces. As Private 3 themselves stated "… if we ask why something is done and the answer is "*because we have always done it that way"* the alarm bells ring…". However should not that perspective be mediated by a broad grounding relevant to the context? Is the existing workforce sufficient in this role?

Employers as 'Trainers'

In many existing cases of workplace delivery within the construction industry it is the employer who is deemed the 'instructor' and the RTO takes on the role of 'assessor' only. There is an argument that assessment is an integral component of the skill development and that the two should not be viewed in isolation. However the contemporary VET system of competency based training tends to promote this separation. Public B provides a good example of this form of delivery. Funding is the key issue here and currently limits contact hours (approximating only 10 – 12 hours per stage or 'year' of the course). This contact time (or lack of thereof) tends to disallow extended observations of the apprentice's work practice by the assessor. Third party reporting appears to be an essential component yet none of the representatives of Public RTOs gave much credence, nor considered avenues for the collection of this form of evidence. Private RTOs likewise were not particularly confident of the evidence that was collected from supervisors or managers.

However all three of the private RTOs interviewed stated a preference for assessing the workers over extended periods of observed practice and always with clustered competencies. This reflects our own preference and that of many TAFE based instructors. All three private RTOs also stated that current audit practices tended to disallow this approach and so in attempting best practice they find themselves "…risk managing…" their assessments for arguably the wrong reasons.

Points for consideration

- Do 'one man' employers have the time to train apprentices? While larger firms may 'farm out' their apprentices to subcontractors, are such apprentices any better off under this system? How much material that is ostensibly 'peripheral' to the doing of a task, yet ultimately informs the problem solving and transfer elements? Is the appropriateness of 'doing' being lost to practice by imposing the training upon the employer? Do we accept the argument proposed by Private 2, that competency is entry level only and that the new 'tradesperson' will eventually develop this knowledge and skill as time and context allows?

- It has long been acknowledged that much, if not most, skill development takes place in the workplace. Indeed even as an apprentice myself I argued that at TAFE one might be 'taught' everything, yet learn nothing. While at work we can be 'taught' nothing, yet learn everything – as much hinges on the learning styles of the apprentice, as well as the training delivery style of instructors and co-workers or employers. If this is the case, why is it that we are yet to incorporate any element of training in mentoring, instruction, or for that matter assessment (given the integral role) in our trade or post trade qualifications? [i.e. An individual that goes through 'the trade' (Cert III) or higher levels (through Cert IV or Diploma) may never be taught anything on how to handle an apprentice, train them, mentor them, or guide others in mentoring them.]
- If employers simply do not have the time to 'train', and the importance of long duration observations of practice (of clustered competencies) is trustworthy, how might this be funded for application in small regional workplaces?

Some Concluding Remarks

It is to be acknowledged that talk of 'the trade' is not much countenanced in contemporary VET literature, being considered overly indeterminate: By this I mean that 'competency' is considered 'measurable'; 'the trade', is not. However, there is value in maintaining our link to this human vessel of broad knowledge, skill, and experience pertaining to various sectors of our industry: Indeed this networking and sharing of experiences is often the only bridge between these sectors. [Note: graded competency assessment is not widely used in practice in TAFE NSW, see also Costin, 2005]

In accepting this, if we choose to bow to the mounting pressure and belief that competency is in fact 'entry level' training and that 'the trade' is something else, how are we to recognise this something else? Can this be reflected within the AQTF system? Do we need another level of recognition, based upon evaluation rather than 'training': some form of evaluation for which application is made 'post competency'? There are sufficient national and international examples, both historical and current, from which a relevant model might be developed [e.g. the European/Anglo Saxon style of Guild type historically used in England and Australia, the German and French versions of journeymen, and the still existent French 'Companion' guild are other examples. Then there is the Korean approach to maintaining historically relevant skill sets and other Asian (Philippines, Japan, China possibly) approaches that have ways of recognising high skill development.] While this may reduce pressure on assessors of 'competency' in the workplace, there remains risks that must be considered, particularly with regard to Occupation Health and Safety and transfer at 'competency' level, and of insurance and remuneration upon 'trade' recognition.

The avenues explored here offer elements worthy of consideration, yet as whole practices we would contend they are inappropriate for trade based skill development and evaluation, particularly in small regional workplaces. And so, while borrowing much that is valuable from other models, we must consider the development of avenues other.

Avenues Other: Some Direction

The point form proposal that follows should be taken as guidance towards a model, rather than the offering of a fixed one. As elements of possible approaches to

delivery, they aim to maintain 'training' – the purposefully guided development of skill and knowledge (as against recognition of existing competence) – that is not apparent in the approaches reviewed. What is proposed is a 'partial' workplace delivery model with the greater quota of site based training and assessment rationalised to context.

- Adopting a 'whole of practice' model of skill development and its evaluation.
- Bulk of formally guided generic skill & knowledge development off-site (flexibly and rational to context and skill development requirements)
- Online workplace activity material extending face to face delivery, improving access and contextualisation
- Bulk of practical and written assessments on-site or online (flexible and rational to context and assessment requirements) [* see note below].
- Practical assessments of clustered competencies conducted on-site over extended time frames.
- Key skill development goals (clustered competencies or otherwise) assessed at staged intervals throughout the apprenticeship period
- Assessments integrated with skill development – feed forward modelling
- Whole of workplace development approach – employers and or supervisors integral to apprentice skill development.
- Online portal access for 'third party' data uptake (no paper inputs)
- Open acknowledgement and support of Legitimate Subjective Observation: (LSO is prevalent yet not formalised in all the avenues of assessment reviewed in this paper) rather than allowing the 'blind eye' to continue the pretence of pseudo objectivity in assessment.
- RPL at entry to course and entry to each competency.
- Graded competency allowing for, promoting, and rewarding, the pursuit of excellence
- Inclusion of mentoring, training, and assessment, practices in trade training (within certificate 3 and above).

* There are identity issues here that would have to be risk managed if they were to be adopted. How to 'prove' that the assessment was completed by the stated individual is difficult, as it is with site-based work that is claimed as being completed by the apprentice/applicant, yet was not seen to be performed by an assessor.

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