

Articulation issues: From ANTA competencies to university degree

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Abstract

Last year I began a research project looking at the difficulties and issues of articulation as a group of students moved from the *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems* into the final year of a university degree. The research involved a sample of six students who had completed the *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems* and entered the degree program expecting the transition to be moderately smooth. The research set out to discover how effective the articulation pathway was. The data gathering has continued as the students begin their second year of part time study. The research provides a method of monitoring the effectiveness of the articulation pathway, and it is expected also that the students will benefit from their experience in the project.

The data from the second questionnaire shed more light on the competencies each student covered in the *Training and Assessment Systems* training package. Data was collected on the Provider, method of study, text books used and where possible, the number of hours taken to cover each unit of competency. It also highlighted a number of issues and problems which have to be faced in articulating such different kinds of courses. These are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

At the AVETRA conference last year I spoke about the early stages of a research project looking at the difficulties and issues of articulation as students moved from the *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems* into the final year of a university degree.

The research involved a sample of six students who had completed the *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems* and entered the degree program with credit given for eight units, or one full time year of degree work. The research set out to discover whether

- 1) the students had sufficient concepts, skills, and knowledge to enter the Bachelor degree with a credit of eight units
- 2) the units selected for their university level study could bridge them sufficiently into the higher cognitive, reflective and critical thinking outcomes required of university study
- 3) the students felt at the end of their course that they had missed anything important which other university graduates had acquired.

The research is still in progress and this paper will address new data and comment on a number of complex issues which are arising.

The sample

There are five students remaining in the research sample. Two teach in an Aboriginal vocational school for Years 11 and 12 near Esperance on the south coast of Western Australia. They work in a very supportive environment, where they frequently study together and from time to time submit joint projects and assignments. However with the

absence of the Principal for much of last year, they both carried increased workloads and were frequently very busy.

Two others are at the Pilbara College of TAFE at Hedland, nearly 1700 K north of Esperance. One is a lecturer in the electrical trades who has been teaching for over twenty years, and the other has a Diploma in FrontLine Management and has recently joined the TAFE college from BHP, where she was involved in staff training. The fifth is a support staff member at Curtin University in Perth, where she works in the Faculty of Education, Language Studies and Social Work, and is involved in staff development. Previously she ran a business as a training manager and hopes to do so again when she completes the degree.

Two are female and three male. All were full time trainers at the time they studied for their *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems*.

Currently they all study part time by Distance Education, including the student in Perth. This is the second year of their study and they are already beginning to spread out in their rate of study and their achievement levels.

Table 1: Student progress

	Number of units completed by Dec 2002	Number of units enrolled in this semester	Number of units enrolled in next semester	Course weighted average %
Student 1	3	3	2	82.0
Student 2	4	2	2	77.0
Student 3	4	2	2	73.5
Student 4	4	2	2	85.5
Student 5	4	2	2	76.5

The research

To this date they have answered two questionnaires. The first questionnaire was designed as an introductory exercise to try to set the scene. There were things which I needed to know, like whether they had all completed Certificate IV in *Assessment and Workplace Training* before they embarked on the Diploma, for instance. I needed to know a bit about their experiences with the Diploma, which units of competence they had covered and where they felt their strengths lay. They were also asked to comment on the amount of background and theory they received in the Diploma to back up the competencies. I also wanted some ideas on why they had enrolled in the degree and what they hoped to gain from doing a university level course.

The second questionnaire, on which I will base this paper, attempted to gather more information on the Diploma course they had completed. For each of the *Workplace and Assessment Systems* units they had studied they were asked to give the name of the Provider, the mode of study (ie, face to face, distance education, etc) and the names of any texts books used in the unit, the number of hours spent on the unit and the assignments completed.

It was my intention to assess from this information the depth into which the *Workplace and Assessment Systems* competencies had been explored and the level at which they

had been achieved. I hoped to get a feel for the rigour, or lack of rigour, in the course and the standards reached.

The questionnaires were distributed by email, completed and returned by email or by post.

Findings

Three private Registered Training Providers (RTOs) delivered the courses to the five students. In the case of the Hedland students, their Award was certified (as distinct from delivered) by their local TAFE College when they had completed the distance Education requirements of their interstate provider. The Esperance students' Diplomas were certified by a TAFE College in Perth, again after they had completed the work set by their private provider. The other respondent had received the Diploma from the private provider which had delivered the course.

Modes of study were varied but in each case they were described as flexible. The following delivery modes were mentioned by the five respondents.

- Course work by distance education
- RPL, Face to face, one on one, some flexible delivery
- A combination of face to face and distance education
- Distance Education
- Face to face workshop with substantial reading and activity outside the classroom
- Face to face and independent study

One respondent described the face to face component of his course as flexible and interactive. Note also that he refers to Certificate IV as comprising the first part of his course, as in fact did all the students. In each case the Certificate IV course ran directly into the Diploma.

Firstly the delivery of the training was of a relatively flexible nature in an attempt to work in with all the staff who were working full time. There were a number of visits from [the instructor] to [the institution] where he conducted a number of workshops. These varied from 1 day visits to 3-4 day visits involving intensive training sessions covering the relevant material associated with the Diploma.

From memory, the course was quite interactive and allowed for questions and discussion as we grasped the relevant skills required for the units. We completed smaller tasks as part of the Cert 1-4 qualifications. These included practical demonstrations as well as some written tasks.

Three people mentioned intensive workshops, or training sessions of one, three or six day duration. One described the delivery in more detail.

The Diploma was split into two six day intensive workshop blocks with five months in between the blocks. The learning was done in a workshop situation, which was intensive, and required a substantial amount of reading and activity outside the classroom

Three respondents mentioned RPL. Several elaborated further.

... we were interviewed by the instructor to ascertain what recognised prior learning we had so that the appropriate training could be implemented according to the areas we needed to cover.

The items I produced in the interview were credited towards my Diploma so I only needed to complete 1 or 2 assignments.

The questions regarding set text books were intended to elicit whether the students had read any theory or research as part of their study. In each case the respondents said they had only used materials prepared by the provider – photocopied workbooks, handouts, or manuals. The Hedland respondents referred to their Provider's materials as Study Guides, and there appeared to be three of them designed specifically for the Diploma course. The Esperance people referred to the booklets they had used in Certificate IV, *Work Place Training* and *Workplace Assessor* being used as references. Another respondent referred to the use of various ANTA, Training Accreditation Council and Department of Training publications.

This information gave very little idea of content, theoretical components or depth of coverage of the various competencies, or whether the practical tasks had been supported by underpinning knowledge.

The answers on assignments were also varied. Two respondents were disappointingly vague.

I found it difficult to remember how many hours it took to complete the assignments. I also found it difficult to give specific titles to assignments.

It was a while back when we completed the training for our Diploma and some of the details are a little sketchy.

The most formal assessment was done by the Hedland respondents, who also appeared to be the most definite about what they had done. Here are the assignments they listed.

- Assessment 2500 word Maximum: Design a course based on competency standards within a Training Package
- Assignment 2500 words maximum: including Evaluation Plan and Report
- Assignment 2500 to 4000 words: Audit and Report on a Vocational Education and Training Process
- Design and establish the training system for induction training for BHP Billiton to be presented by EP TAFE
- Manage the training system I designed for in unit 1. Numerous meetings with the stakeholders to insure the college was meeting their needs and requirements. Complied with college guidelines and to Mines Department of WA. Including things like assessment and records which had to be kept for 5 years.
- The project was to evaluate the induction process that had been developed and implemented above.
- Was to look at developing the induction for BHP Billiton as above.

The fifth respondent listed her assignments as follows.

- Case studies of training environments
- Analysis of the system, to determine compliance with audit requirements (like a TAC audit), contingency plans, policies, procedures and system manual designed and used by the training company
- Live analysis of the RTO's training system
- This was an analysis of the existing system and improvements were implemented.

Several students mentioned the flexibility of deadlines and working at their own pace. This was obviously seen as a positive feature of this kind of study program.

The issues

Ever since I first undertook research in the area of articulation and cross sectoral transfer (Parkinson, Mitchell & McBeath, 1986) one of the most difficult issues has been the suspicion by universities that practical tasks, such as those taught at TAFE colleges, and in the training sector generally, lack the theoretical underpinning knowledge, and hence rigor, required by university study.

In the intervening years, universities themselves have moved more towards “clinical practice” in the preparation of professionals for the workplace, while continuing to value the knowledge emerging from up-to-date research and theory. On the other hand, the training sector has moved further away from the use of research, theory and underpinning knowledge, towards assessed performance of defined competencies. The Training Packages used in the training sector “consist of industry-based competency standards, together with qualification and assessment guidelines”, which “are gradually replacing all previous forms of curriculum approaches.” (Smith, 2002). Students are required to do things without necessarily finding out why. The gap between the kind of education which universities value and that valued in the training sector has once again widened, and the suspicions voiced by the universities in the 1980s remain.

Another important issue is that concerning “recognition of prior learning” (RPL) or “recognition of current competency” (RCC) in the training sector. One of the respondents in this study mentioned having to submit only two assignments after he had produced a number of items requested by the instructor. This teacher was not increasing his knowledge and competence, as he would be required to by a university course, but merely producing evidence that he was already performing the competency in his work.

There is also the possibility of universities being asked to award credit for Recognition of Prior Learning or Exemptions given towards the Diploma. When this occurs, how can anybody know exactly what the original knowledge or performance might have been? Does this knowledge or performance relate even vaguely to the university unit the student is exempted from?

A related factor is the current bureaucratic restrictions on the training sector as to when courses can be offered and how often. I recently dealt with a request from a trainer for university credit to be granted against her newly completed *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems*, but when I inspected her certificate, I noticed that every one of her units, in both the Certificate IV and the Diploma, was given as an Exemption. I immediately contacted the staff training officer who had certified the Diploma certificate, and asked him for an explanation. He told me that as the RTO had not sought funding to offer the *Diploma in Training and Assessment Systems*, he had allowed this staff

member to complete the course under the banner of a *Certificate in Business Management* and transfer that to the Diploma she really needed. This matter is not yet resolved, but it is possible that this trainer holds an invalid Diploma because of the effort of that RTO to “get around” the regulations.

A final issue I would like to address is the difference as I see it between the quality of one-off professional development sessions and formal courses. In the case of my sample, I believe both ends of this continuum were represented. It was disconcerting to read comments from some of the respondents that they did not really remember what assignments they had done, or how long they had spent on each unit. This vagueness, while not casting aspersions on the honesty or even the quality of the teaching and learning involved, does indicate a casualness of approach which would not have occurred in a formal or more rigorous course.

The level of flexibility of delivery may partly explain the casualness, but I doubt whether it would have happened with a university course, no matter how flexible the delivery. There is research questioning the nature and value of professional development when it is not reinforced with adequate in depth analysis and application, and relevant follow-up activities. (Ball, 1996; Wilson & Berne, 1999).

The next stage

The next stage of the research will look at the university units from which the Diploma students have been exempted, and ascertain what the respondents might think about them.

It was already evident from the research conducted last year that the amount of credit transfer awarded to these students was too much. They had been given the 200 points of credit according to a university approved decision set out a number of years before. Innovations such as this however sometimes need to be monitored and evaluated and can be altered on the advice of the Head of Department. This research is providing the monitoring and evaluating process and the students have agreed to take part in the research on a voluntary basis. Whatever the research reveals and whatever the final advice given by the Head of Department might be, they will not lose their 200 points of credit.

It is too early yet to attempt answers to the three research questions given at the beginning of this paper. However, patterns are emerging and the issues of articulation and its inherent problems are beginning to take shape. It is hoped that three or four more questionnaires or even interviews might elicit rich data to help identify the problems implicit in articulating from one kind of course to another. So far the data appears more positive than at first expected. The experiences of the students now into the second year of their course are not traumatic, and their results are proving acceptable, some indeed are excellent. They themselves continue to indicate a high level of belief in the pathway they have undertaken.

One of the reasons for discussing this issue at a conference like this is the hope that people who have taught in the Diploma course come together with others who have taught in university VET teacher training courses. Through discussion and the sharing of ideas we can shed light on some more of the issues which will arise in this ongoing research, perhaps identifying further important questions which need to be asked. We may even get to the point of suggesting some answers to the problems of students

articulating from a course designed for one set of purposes to one which claims to be more deeply reflective and theoretical and, in consequence, more highly professional.

With the current redesign and further development of the ANTA Certificate IV and Diploma courses, it is expected that articulation from the Diploma into the degree will become a preferred pathway in the future. It is therefore essential that university courses can retain their professional integrity and ensure that students do not graduate with too many gaps in their professionalism and critical skills.

References

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