

# **Communities of practice: supporting teachers of youth (15-19 years) in TAFE**

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## **Abstract**

This paper addresses issues around supporting teachers in TAFE who are delivering training to youth (aged 15-19 years). TAFE in Victoria has seen an expansion of youth programs in 2003 with the role out of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and increase in a number of other personal development youth programs offered. TAFE teachers have been confronted with issues that have not been apparent teaching older cohorts of students.

The Centre for Curriculum Innovation and Development, VET Research and Resources Unit at Victoria University is developing a virtual community of practice (CoP) for staff at in the TAFE Division who provide training programs to young people aged 15-19.

The CoP is designed to improve the capability of staff to engage and provide student-centered learning to this cohort. It is also intended to expand opportunities for internal and external networking by imparting new knowledge, providing access to youth related information and resources and building partnerships with external organisations, agencies and other Institutes.

This paper covers the issues that TAFE are dealing with in providing learning programs to this cohort and discuss the effectiveness of a CoP model in supporting teaching and support staff.

## **Introduction**

Victoria University is conducting an action-based research project that investigates the implementation and application of *virtual* Communities of Practice (CoP) through a youth portal (website). The objective is to develop the members' capabilities in improving the outcomes of 15-19 year old youth in an adult learning environment. The CoP will support TAFE practitioners in the "sharing of knowledge, information and learning". It will encourage members to improve their capability in the support and delivery of youth-related programs that will capture people's ideas and innovation. (Mitchell, 2002)

Members currently comprise of TAFE practitioners from Victoria University, and will include other TAFE's and the community. Underpinning the project is a train-the-trainer professional development model to support the increasing number of staff across TAFE working with young people. Organisational membership comprises of team leaders employed as managers, teachers and support personnel. The aim is to raise awareness of support and community services and networking to encourage capacity building within the institute and the community.

The CoP will expand opportunities for internal and external networking by imparting new knowledge, building partnerships with external organisations, agencies and other

Institutes. It will expand professional development opportunities that will improve the skill needs of teachers, trainers and support staff.

“A communities of practice construct builds an action learning framework into the staff linkages. In this way, staff are reviewing practice, consolidating program delivery, mentoring new staff and organising professional development.” (Mitchell, 2002)

## **Research method**

In 2002 the TAFE Division of Victoria University (VU) established a Youth Support Network, who convenes monthly to develop and support youth education, training and employment outcomes in the metropolitan region and specifically within the VU community.

Membership of the Youth Support Network includes representation from the VET Research and Resources Unit of the university, responsible for researching and making recommendations to the network on professional development, funding opportunities and capacity building. A key role of the network is staff professional development.

Research was conducted over eight months (2002-2003) and the following quantitative methods of data collection were used. These were:

- Focus group discussion and interviews (group and individual)
- Evaluation of professional development activities
- Reports and recommendations arising from YSN meetings

## **Findings and discussion**

There was a significant number of young people aged between 15-19 years enrolled in TAFE presenting with range of issues including homelessness, health-related, learning difficulties, behavioral, disengaged from learning and society. Before many of these young people can become engaged learners their personal well-being needs had to be addressed. Links to internal and external support services would enable teaching and support staff to provide timely and appropriate information, advice and referrals.

The research also identified a need for easy access to youth-specific teaching and learning resources and to local support services. Teachers and trainers were concerned about their inability to attend formal face-to-face scheduled youth professional development sessions due to teaching commitments or campus location. Sessional employees surveyed also indicated remuneration to attend meetings or all professional development activities was not always available, which led to limited participation in TAFE professional development activities or meetings.

In addition, evaluation of feedback from participants in formal youth-focused professional development sessions generated the establishment of a CoP by the participants who met informally or over coffee to maintain the energy, ideas and discussion generated at the formal session through to their practice. Research further indicated that although staff wished to attend these informal meetings, restrictions

such as arranging a time to suit everyone and on-going support by management to attend informal meetings were significant barriers and these meetings soon lapsed.

### ***Recommendations arising from research***

A recommendation arising from the research conducted by the VRR was to establish a youth portal (website) to support Institute staff with easy access to resources, and a chat site that provides an innovative, targeted and accessible approach to supporting their ongoing professional development through a *virtual* CoP. The portal will have the capacity to support staff outside normal teaching time and enable more teachers, trainers and support staff access to professional development.

The teaching, learning and support resources placed on the portal will support educational, experiential, literacy and numeracy, vocational, work-related, and personal development programs. Information on community projects and programs, Institute policies, guidelines and procedures and youth-specific links will provide easy access to teaching, learning and support resources and will provide Institute staff with an innovative flexible approach to self-directed professional development and induction.

A pilot action-learning train-the-trainer implementation plan will be adopted, that will invite members into the Communities of Practice from across different program areas. Members participating involved in the project will have a strong commitment to improving the outcomes of the target group. The members will gain confidence and expertise through the acquisition of knowledge and skills to deal with youth-specific issues, that relate to the different types of services available in the region, for example health, housing, employment and education. When members are confident they will have the responsibility of facilitating an action-learning group in their own areas.

The portal will have a link to a community based chat site and a designated convener will facilitate regular chat sessions for its members to share their highlights and concerns. The informal online discussions will foster trust and a sense of common purpose among the participants. Live online professional development sessions led by an expert will further provide staff with an innovative approach to supporting their ongoing professional development.

The *virtual* CoP will pilot an interactive online threaded discussion session (using video streaming) on a topic/s of interest/issue identified by the members of the group. The session will value-add to ongoing professional development being delivered to teachers and coordinators of youth programs at VU. A subject expert/guest speaker will lead an online session and topics may focus on:

- dealing with emotional problems
- developing strategies for classroom management
- creating the optimum learning environment.

Following the pilot with VU staff, other Institutes, schools and community organisations and agencies will be invited to participate in the CoP, which will enable members to form CoP's around identified topics and issues.

### **Conclusions**

The portal will enhance the delivery of quality youth programs. It will support the wider VU community, with easy access to teaching and learning resources, with links to other Institutes and community resources and support services. It will establish a quality management benchmark in client support, and will include access to external support through welfare and guidance services in the region and link with the strategic goals of the Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs).

The portal will facilitate professional networking through electronic means with other teachers, trainers and youth workers to explore topics of interest, pursue shared goals and address common problems. In addition, it will facilitate external networking to support capacity building through collaboration to build partnerships with communities, agencies, industry and employers.

The project will demonstrate to many members how ICT can support teaching and learning, and utilises an online referral services in the region will benchmark professional practice and improve organisational productivity.

A key factor for success of this community of practice is the train-the-trainer model, whereby, team leaders are committed and accountable for transferring knowledge, experiences and technical skills.

Membership of the pilot group will include sessional staff. The piloting of this youth-focussed community of practice is strategic in changing the culture of the organisation. The piloting of this youth-focussed community of practice can be a modeled across the university to help manage and support all sessional staff .

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