

Teacher and Institute enthusiasm for quality teaching and learning

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Abstract

The rapid rates of change in industry and the world of work require TAFE Institutes to consider how they will manage the up-skilling of the workforce to meet current business, industry and community requirements. In response to these challenges, the Victorian TAFE Development Centre (the Centre) initiated the Teaching and Learning Excellence Program in 2005. The Centre's program funds and supports projects designed by each Institute that are focused on supporting the growth of high quality teaching and learning practice across the TAFE system. Each project team aims to develop pedagogical knowledge and the ability to apply it in VET contexts. Projects engage teachers in different ways of working to generate new knowledge through enquiry, research, critical reflection and practice-based learning. This paper is based on an independent evaluation of projects conducted at eight different TAFE Institutes in Victoria in 2005-2006 as part of the Centre's program. The evaluator was commissioned by the Centre to investigate a range of issues including the degree to which teachers have been successful in developing new practices. While the evaluator's final report focuses on innovative approaches to learning developed by the project teams, this paper highlights the two factors that most influenced the innovation: teachers' enthusiasm and Institutes' enthusiasm for improving quality practice in teaching and learning.

Introduction

The rapid rates of change in industry and the world of work require Technical and Further Education (TAFE) Institutes to consider how they will manage the up-skilling of their workforce to meet current business, industry and community requirements. One response to this need for up-skilling is the TAFE Teaching and Learning Excellence program conducted by the Victorian TAFE Development Centre (the Centre). The program aims to improve the pedagogical knowledge of the TAFE staff involved and to add value to ongoing practice in their Institutes. Detailed information about this program is available at <http://www.tafecentre.vic.edu.au/teachingandlearning.php>

The TAFE Teaching and Learning Excellence program supports projects designed by each Institute that are focused on supporting the growth of high quality teaching and learning practice across the TAFE system. Each project needs to:

- develop pedagogical knowledge and the ability to apply it in VET contexts
- engage teachers in different ways of working to generate new knowledge through enquiry, research, critical reflection and practice-based learning
- align to strategic goals and be incorporated within a human resource planning and development framework in order to make a significant contribution to improving the Institute's performance.

Participants in this program are expected to provide input to seminars and workshops as part of the TAFE Development Centre's annual program of professional development activities, and to contribute to the growth of leadership professionalism

in TAFE, with improved outcomes for students, business, industry and the community.

At the commencement of the evaluation project in August 2006, eight TAFE Institutes had undertaken projects under this funding program, with 440 staff involved. Four of these are in metropolitan locations and four are in regional locations. The eight are, in alphabetical order:

- Box Hill Institute of TAFE
- East Gippsland Institute of TAFE
- Gordon Institute of TAFE
- Holmesglen Institute of TAFE
- Kangan Batman Institute of TAFE
- University of Ballarat
- Victoria University
- Wodonga Institute of TAFE.

Projects are locally designed, managed and led, and the outcomes are locally evaluated. As part of the funding agreement, Institutes undertook to cooperate with an independent evaluation process to monitor outcomes against specified key indicators.

The purpose of the 2006 evaluation project was to evaluate the following aspects in relation to each of the TAFE Teaching and Learning Excellence projects currently under way in eight Institutes:

- the degree to which teachers have been successful in reviewing their teaching practices and gaining new knowledge and skills to their professional teaching practices
- the quality of the outcomes against the key performance measures outlined in the funding agreement between the Centre and the Institute
- the level of satisfaction with the project, its design, content, facilitation and knowledge sharing outcomes, among participants, teaching and learning managers, program leaders and other relevant staff
- the level of satisfaction with and commitment to the program by the Institute
- the extent to which the project has contributed to constructive sharing of learning with colleagues and the value of new knowledge gained
- the extent to which the project has benefited other Institute programs or initiatives
- the degree to which any knowledge and skills learnt from the project has been disseminated for system-wide benefit
- the extent to which issues, barriers and conditions in TAFE Institutes may affect the ability of teachers to apply practice-based learning to their teaching environment.

The full evaluation report addresses each of these aspects of the program. This paper focuses specifically on the factors affecting the achievement of aspects of the program.

Literature review

VET pedagogy is undergoing change, in response to significant external pressures on training providers. In particular, contemporary VET pedagogy needs to be more aligned with skills needed by people in the world of work (Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes and Solomon 2003). This alignment with the needs of the world of work represents a shift in what is now understood to be good pedagogy in VET. However, making this shift can be a substantial challenge for some VET teachers and Smith and Blake (2006) find that not all VET practitioners have shifted their practice:

The major conclusion of this *At a glance* is that contemporary education and training has moved from being almost entirely instructor- and provider-controlled to being a process where learners are much more likely and are expected to be involved in planning what is to be learned, how and when—and how the learning will be assessed. Many VET teachers have already adopted the approach proposed here. For many others, however, these approaches to teaching and learning may be both challenging and confronting.

In response to these challenges, a review of the literature indicates that a number of new and positive trends are affecting teaching and learning in VET as follows:

- a new emphasis on creativity not just compliance
- an increased focus on the teacher working within a team of practitioners
- a growing appreciation of the importance of learning in the workplace including informal learning
- a heightened recognition of the importance of innovation.

Each of these four trends is discussed below.

Valuing creativity by teachers is a contemporary trend in VET. Schofield and McDonald (2004) find that the current compliance framework of the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) is a necessary but not sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. They argue that what is needed is ‘a capacity-building approach that emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgement and growth rather than simply compliance’ (p.5).

A second contemporary trend in VET is teachers effectively operating more and more within teams. Guthrie (2004) described the changing roles of VET teachers, which is becoming more diverse and team-based. Mitchell, McKenna, Perry and Bald (2005a) identified teams of VET practitioners who apply professional judgment in implementing Training Packages, leading to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment in the sector. VET teams analysed by Mitchell et al. (2005a) provide examples of creativity in the following ways: implementing a qualification not previously offered in a local region; embedding sustainability principles in the delivery of Training Packages; integrating employability skills in training; and establishing a simulated working production company for the delivery and assessment of a Training Package.

Acknowledging learning in the workplace is a third contemporary trend in VET. Wood (2004) finds that fully on-the-job training, the majority of which is conducted in the workplace as part of the normal experience of the employee, is perceived to

offer benefits to apprentices/trainees, employers and registered training organisations (RTOs). Wood finds that fully on-the-job training is viewed by learners and registered training organisations as a good way to learn as it provides flexibility for all concerned and financial incentives to employers. With appropriate support for learners, benefits of this type of training include learning that is customised, and learning that encompasses real work experiences and is relevant to the individual and the enterprise. On-the-job training also helps to identify ongoing employment opportunities for the learners and employers.

Appreciating the importance of innovation and cultivating it is a fourth contemporary trend in VET. Callan (2004) advocates that the VET sector ‘needs to be serious about building and funding innovation learning cultures and promoting innovation as a core capability within their enterprises’ (p.6). He continues:

Failure-tolerant leaders of VET organisations need to be even more creative in how they continue to support and reward their leading innovators and educational entrepreneurs. (p.6)

These four trends are emerging in VET practice and demonstrate the responsiveness by many VET providers and practitioners to the significant external pressures on providers cited above.

These trends from the research provide a backdrop for the discussion below about how VET practitioners in eight TAFE Institutes were willing to change their practice, despite challenges they faced.

Research method

As there were multiple research and evaluation tasks involved in the evaluation project – for example, to identify exemplars of new and improved pedagogical practice, to determine the level of satisfaction with and commitment to the program by the Institute, and to assess the extent to which the project has benefited other Institute programs – a versatile methodology was required. Hence a pragmatist ‘mixed methods’ approach (Cresswell 2003) was followed, as it allowed for the use of both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

The five data collection methods used were a survey, interviews, observations, focus group and the examination of individual project documentation. Visits were conducted to each of the eight TAFE Institutes involved in August and September 2006 and the focus group was conducted in October, to test the interim findings.

Findings and discussion

There were many and varied exemplars of new and improved pedagogical practice across the eight projects. For example, staff at Box Hill Institute of TAFE experimented with the use of large teaching spaces to investigate m-learning and e-learning. Participants in the project at the Gordon Institute of TAFE used an off-the-shelf package about teaching and learning to review and refresh aspects of their practice such as developing stimulating learning activities. Participants in the project at Victoria University changed their approach to the teaching of literacy to incorporate

a user-friendly and customised website.

81% of participants who responded to the survey (n=59) considered that they reviewed their teaching practice and gained new knowledge and skills, to a high/very high extent. The full report contains numerous qualitative examples that substantiate this positive self-assessment. For example, electro-technology teachers at the University of Ballarat TAFE Division changed their teaching of a module from being predominantly classroom-based theory sessions to students having substantial hands-on practice. Multimedia teachers at Victoria University TAFE Division incorporated into their teaching an innovative website designed to improve the literacy skills of students. Automotive teachers at Kangan Batman TAFE revised their approach to assessment after critically reflecting on their previous practice. Teachers across multiple disciplines at the Gordon Institute of TAFE refreshed their approaches to teaching and learning after revisiting theories about adult learning.

The sharing with colleagues was a feature of all projects. For instance, at Wodonga Institute of TAFE, one middle-level manager commented: “The project is about establishing a baseline of shared understanding.” A senior manager commented on a strategy to promote sharing: “The project group has gone back to their peers and have said ‘we are making sure you will be supported in the future’.”

Each of the projects benefited other Institute programs. As an example, at Holmesglen Institute of TAFE, according to a member of the project management team, different departments within the Institute are now taking up the mentoring model and in some cases are examining the possibility of including mentoring in a teacher’s load. One department that already had a mentoring program feels that its program has benefited from this Institute-wide project.

The project management teams used a variety of enabling strategies. To sustain the benefits of the project at East Gippsland Institute of TAFE, the project management team deliberately linked this teaching and learning excellence project to other initiatives within the Institute, such as the leadership and induction programs. The project management team also sees the network of clusters formed during the project as holding within it the potential to continue thriving after the Centre’s funding is exhausted.

In brief, the four major findings from the evaluation are, first, that TAFE staff have the capacity to rethink and remake their practice, provided they are given time and space and the assistance such as mentoring or project facilitation. Second, TAFE staff have not only the capacity, they also have the enthusiasm and passion required to develop new skills and knowledge. Third, TAFE staff who are reviewing their practice benefit from participating in structured, collegial and collaborative learning activities. Fourth, it is possible for TAFE staff simultaneously to review their practice and to help achieve strategic goals of their Institutes.

Factors affecting the achievement of the program’s purpose

The discussion below identifies factors affecting the achievement of the program’s purpose, based on the participant survey completed by fifty nine personnel. The

overall purpose of the program is to support the growth of high quality teaching and learning practice across the TAFE system.

The top five factors influencing the achievement of the program's purpose

In the participant survey respondents were asked to identify the five most important factors that have influenced, to date, the achievement of the program's purpose within their own project – with 1 indicating the most important factor, 2 the second most important factor and so on. The results are set out in the table below.

Table 1: The top 5 success factors influencing the achievement of the program's purpose

Factor	Total votes	Ranking (from 1 = most votes)
The participating teachers' enthusiasm for improving quality teaching and learning practice	197	1
Our Institute's enthusiasm for improving the quality of teaching and learning practice	128	2
The use of strategies in the project that engaged teachers in different ways of working, to generate new knowledge	112	3
Participants' own goals for this project	90	4
The collaboration between the project's stakeholders	75	5

It is noteworthy that these five top factors received considerably more 'votes' than the other factors set out in the next table. It is also noteworthy that the top five factors can be grouped into two categories:

- factors 1 and 4 relate to teachers' enthusiasm
- factors 2, 3 and 5 relate to the Institute's enthusiasm, strategies and collaboration.

Hence these two factors – teachers and institute enthusiasm – provide a key finding from this evaluation and influenced the selection of the title for the report (*Teacher and Organisational Enthusiasm Drive Quality*) and this article.

The next most popular choices of success factors influencing the program are set out in the table below.

Table 2: Other success factors influencing the program

Factor	Total votes	Ranking (from 1 = most votes)
The support of the project's stakeholders	38	Equal 6
Self-evaluation activities encouraged in the project	38	Equal 6
The amount of time made available for participants in this project	38	Equal 6
The alignment of the project to the Institute's strategic goals and human resource planning and development framework	35	9
The value of new exemplars in the Institute of quality teaching and learning practice	27	10

Factor	Total votes	Ranking (from 1 = most votes)
The local project management processes used in the project	25	11
The culture of the Institute	22	12
Our Institute’s experience in managing projects	13	13

It is interesting to note how few votes these other factors received. For example, each of these factors received less than one vote from the fifty nine respondents. This is all the more surprising given that each respondent had the equivalent of (5+4+3+2+1=15) fifteen votes to cast. The one factor that did not receive a vote was: “The positive public profile from being involved in a funded project.” Only one recipient selected the factor “Other (please specify)”.

The lack of votes for other than the top five factors indicates that the top five factors had overwhelming impact on the achievement of the program’s objectives.

The impact of different factors on the achievement of the program’s purpose

While each project had its own specific objectives, the overall purpose of the program is to support the growth of high quality teaching and learning practice across the TAFE system.

Participants were asked to select one option – from very unimportant to very important – for how important each of the following factors was in affecting the achievement of the program’s purpose.

Table 3: The impact of different factors on the achievement of the program’s purpose

Factors	1. Very unimportant	2.	3. Neither important nor unimportant	4.	5. Very important
1. The Institute’s experience in managing projects			26%	47%	27%
2. The Institute’s enthusiasm for improving the quality of teaching and learning practice			2%	35%	63%
3. The participating teachers’ enthusiasm for improving quality teaching and learning practice				21%	79%
4. The support of the project’s stakeholders			8%	60%	33%
5. The collaboration between the project’s stakeholders			8%	51%	41%
6. The culture of the Institute		2%	15%	54%	29%
7. The use of strategies in the project that engaged teachers in different ways of working, to generate new knowledge			14%	30%	55%
8. The alignment of the project to the Institute’s strategic goals and human resource planning and development framework		2%	18%	51%	29%
9. Participants’ own goals for this project			6%	35%	59%

<i>Factors</i>	<i>1. Very unimportant</i>	<i>2.</i>	<i>3. Neither important nor unimportant</i>	<i>4.</i>	<i>5. Very important</i>
10. The local project management processes used in the project		2%	30%	32%	36%
11. Self-evaluation activities encouraged in the project		2%	13%	54%	31%
12. The amount of time made available for participants in this project	2%	2%	4%	16%	60%
13. The value of new exemplars in the Institute of quality teaching and learning practice			12%	50%	38%
14. The positive public profile from being involved in a funded project	2%	20%	38%	24%	16%
15. Other factor. 1 response (2%)					

The above results confirm the earlier finding that teacher enthusiasm and Institute enthusiasm were positive forces assisting the achievement of the program's purpose. The following specific results are noteworthy:

- 100% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.3, 'the participating teachers' enthusiasm for improving quality teaching and learning practice.'
- 98% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.4, 'the Institute's enthusiasm for improving the quality of teaching and learning practice.'

For Victorian TAFE to continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning, this enthusiasm deserves to be acknowledged, promoted, fostered and supported.

Also of note are the following factors, which also deserve further support in Victorian TAFE:

- 93% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.4, 'the support of the project's stakeholders.' Participants obviously take note of and place a high value on support from stakeholders.
- 92% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.5, 'the collaboration between the project's stakeholders.' Factors 4 and 5 are similar and reinforce the importance of stakeholders being supportive and collaborative. Participants in innovative projects certainly value such behaviour from stakeholders.
- 88% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.13, 'the value of new exemplars in the Institute of quality teaching and learning practice.' This result is an encouragement for Institutes to identify and promote exemplars of good practice.
- 85% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.7, 'the use of strategies in the project that engaged teachers in different ways of working, to generate new knowledge.' This result shows the importance of selecting project strategies that suit the participants and their contexts.
- 85% of respondents chose 4/5 important/very important for factor No.11, 'self-

evaluation activities encouraged in the project.’ This result is a reminder of the value of participants evaluating themselves during a project; that is, taking a degree of responsibility for their own development.

The key findings from the discussion above are as follow:

- Two factors influenced the achievement of objectives more than other factors. The two prominent factors were teachers’ enthusiasm and Institutes’ enthusiasm for improving quality teaching and learning practice.
- The top five factors all relate to teachers’ enthusiasm and the Institute’s enthusiasm, strategies and collaboration. The distinct lack of ‘votes’ in the survey for other than the top five factors indicates that the top five factors had overwhelming impact on the achievement of the program’s objectives.
- For Victorian TAFE to continue to improve the quality of teaching and learning, this enthusiasm deserves to be acknowledged, promoted, fostered and supported.

Conclusions

The combined results from the data in this paper pinpoint the key factors that drive improved quality of teaching and learning in Victorian TAFE: teacher enthusiasm and Institute enthusiasm. The overwhelming key to quality improvement is this enthusiasm to improve, so this enthusiasm deserves to be valued highly and continually nurtured. This finding can not only assist the Centre in future programs, but can assist individual Institutes in improving the quality of service provision.

This finding reinforces and extends the four new positive trends affecting teaching and learning in VET, identified earlier in the literature review. Those trends are as follows: a new emphasis on creativity not just compliance; an increased focus on the teacher working within a team of practitioners; a growing appreciation of the importance of learning in the workplace including informal learning; a heightened recognition of the importance of innovation.

The finding from this research shows that not only were VET practitioners in eight TAFE Institutes willing to change their practice, despite challenges they faced, but they were also able to model an enthusiasm for innovation in pedagogy which is of significance across the sector.

These results complement the findings from a previous national study by the author and his colleagues (Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman and Roy, S. 2006, *Quality is the Key: critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training*). The two studies underline the commitment of practitioners to improving teaching and learning in Australian VET.

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