

Success & successes: working with youth at risk

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Introduction

For three years Wodonga Institute of TAFE has conducted a very successful program designed to engage youth for whom the school system does not suit. In achieving this end, the program is based on a combination of the Certificate of General Education for Adults and the Film, Television, Radio, Multimedia Industry Training Package focusing on high end technology, (including multi media, print, TV and radio) and generic skills (literacy, numeracy, personal skills, etc) to provide students with multiple pathways, plus substantial grounding in foundation skills.

At the conclusion of the second year of the program in 2003, students and teachers participated in a number of focus groups designed to evaluate the program. The evaluation revealed some of the key ingredients thought necessary for successfully engaging and working with this cohort. A more in-depth analysis of the program was undertaken in 2004. The teachers and support staff undertook a 14-week online journal and participated in several focus groups. The online journal provided a means for teachers to express their thoughts and reflections of the program whilst engaged in the day-to-day teaching.

Of the teachers and support staff that comprised the Jumpstart team, six engaged in the research through the two focus groups. Of these, four also undertook to journal their experiences of teaching as part of the program. The research was very organic in nature, with discussions and topics evolving from the experiences the teachers underwent with the students during the final weeks of the year.

In the initial focus groups the participants developed a series of themes on which to guide the journal entries and research inquiries. These were not fixed ideas or designed to confine discussion but to provide food for thought. The intention of the journal entries was to provide a means by which teachers could reflect upon the work they were doing in the program in whichever direction those reflections might take them. The idea behind conducting the journaling process alongside the teaching was to allow the teachers' interactions with the students to provide context to the journal entries.

Exploring the ideas of success, relationships, gender, personality, group dynamics, attendance, engagement, staffing, motivation, discipline, security, support and the adult learning environment; the research aims to inform and guide similar programs that provide opportunities for disengaged youth in the VET sector.

The following report explores the experiences of the teachers in the Jumpstart program engaging young students with learning at TAFE. It is organised around the themes uncovered by the research, the challenges encountered by the teachers and strategies put in place to deal with them.

The purpose of the Jumpstart Program & the alternative

The purpose of the Jumpstart program as perceived by the Jumpstart team was to provide an alternative education option to young people who have exited the school system. The team strove to provide these young people with a positive experience of learning and connecting with adults. The team believed the Jumpstart program:

- “Provided a positive and safe learning environment
- Enabled the young people to form a positive relationship
- Provided students with a sense of achievement
- Developed personal and key living skills
- Showed students that teachers do care about them
- Provided a pathway to further study or employment.”

Although the Jumpstart Program offered a viable alternative for the students wishing to complete years 9 and/or 10, the team still believed school should be their first option. The team agreed that schools offered greater subject choices and opportunities for students including work experience and extra curricular activities that the Jumpstart Program was unable to offer. Schools also offered students a wider social network. While this is true, there were some instances where schools did not meet the needs of some students. It is suggested that some of the reasons schools were not suitable is because they lacked the resources to support students with literacy and numeracy difficulties as well as personal and welfare issues. The larger class sizes also made it difficult for teachers to find sufficient time to develop relationships with students.

Details of the Jumpstart Program – the interview and preference process, the first month and destinations

The program was open to 15 to 19 year olds willing to commit to the 9 to 12 month program. With high demand for places all potential participants were required to undertake an interview.

The interview explored the students’ previous experiences with education, where they had attended and what they had achieved as well as their experiences at school, ‘the good, the bad and the ugly’. Other details included whether they had any physical difficulties or other barriers to coming to TAFE such as transport or accommodation. Also, what the students saw as their real strengths; if they had any hobbies; interests or passions; if they mixed well with others; and whether they would be happy working with a small group; what they thought would be the differences of the adult learning environment to what they have known in the past and how they felt they best learn, whether by doing, demonstrating, reading or listening etc. The students were asked if they were prepared to commit to regular attendance and which course, hospitality or media, would their preference be.

The Program Coordinator and Youth Participation Coordinator, who conducted the interview ensured that the interview process was not about accepting or rejecting students but getting to know them, going on to say that “the interview was not about culling people, it was about getting to know the student and ensuring that TAFE is the best option” for them. Parents and guardians were welcome at the interview but were not essential.

In addition to either the Certificate 1 or 2 in General Education – Adult, students also had the opportunity to complete a Certificate 1 in Media or a Certificate 2 in Hospitality Operations within the 9 to 12 months of the program.

The first month of the program was an introductory transitional period, which focused on orientation and team building. This period also gave the staff involved an opportunity to begin building a relationship with the students and to determine their literacy and numeracy levels and needs.

In 2004, 26 students started the program in the February intake with a further 11 beginning in the April intake. Of the 37 students, 23 completed the Jumpstart program moving onto various destinations including:

- 3 – Returning to the Jumpstart program to complete Certificate II
- 10 – Undertaking mainstream TAFE courses
- 2 – Returning to school to complete year 11
- 2 – In paid employment
- 2 – Looking for employment or exploring TAFE course options
- 1 – Relocated
- 2 – Unknown.

A further 16 students withdrew from the program, their destinations are as follows:

- 1 – Returning to the Jumpstart program to complete Certificate II
- 1 – Returning to school to complete year 11
- 1 – Parenting
- 4 – In paid employment
- 2 – Not studying or working due to health issues
- 2 – Looking for employment or exploring TAFE course options
- 1 – Relocated
- 2 - Unknown.

Exploration of challenges and strategies

Attendance

Regular attendance was one of the bigger obstacles facing the Jumpstart team. It was a behaviour that was normal to Jumpstart students as many had poor attendance rates in the school system. Students often did not attend for substantial periods or simply missed classes and days with no specific pattern. By fourth term, attendance was reduced permanently by one third with another third of students only attending spasmodically.

The Jumpstart team used a number of strategies to both encourage attendance and deal with the affects of irregular attendance. One strategy was positive reinforcement. A teacher participating in the research relayed a story of a particular group of students she had labelled as 'stayers'. She told how these students had shown up on a cold day to canoe down the river. Taking the opportunity to praise the students for their staying power she said "you guys are clearly the hard core stayers" and further reinforced this when they were first to class saying "I knew you would be here. You're a stayer – you know people who aren't here can't pass". After a while she noticed the students parroting these ideas to other students, saying "I'm going to class. I always show up. You can't pass if you're not there". The teacher believed that the students had taken the positive reinforcement onboard as "part of their self image".

The Youth Participation Coordinator regularly chased up students who missed classes. She frequently visited classes to see which students were absent, particularly in the first few weeks of the term. Students who failed to attend after the term break were contacted and encouraged to return to classes, as were students who missed classes throughout periods of the program. Students often required 'rounding up' for classes throughout the day from other places on the campus.

The program did not formally withdraw students who stopped coming to TAFE as they sometimes returned weeks or months later and with additional support could re-engage with the program and even return in the following year if necessary. The Program Coordinator observed that "experiences of attendance not dissimilar to what was expected with this cohort" and that students who "disappear for a month or two... do reappear".

The program did not place a minimum requirement on attendance. This was to prevent students thinking they hadn't attended enough to pass and therefore would cease to attend classes at all. It was also to prevent students attending for only the minimum required.

Erratic attendance by students became very difficult for teachers with the students frequently missing activities, at different stages of activities or on different activities. One teacher stated that they "find it frustrating when they [the students] are away because it's hard to keep track of who has completed what". Adding to the difficulties, having students at different stages presented the increased opportunities for students to copy the work of other students as well as the reluctance of students to move onto new tasks when other students were still completing the previous tasks. The Program Coordinator identified a positive outcome of low attendance levels, saying, "The one real advantage of the absences was that those attending were getting a lot of attention and were completing a lot of work". The higher teacher to student ratio was such that students who do attend benefited from a larger share of the teacher's time.

Engagement

Beyond attending, students also needed to be engaged by the learning and to participate in class. The team found engaging these students was one of the greatest obstacles with the Jumpstart program. It was very difficult to cater to the variety of skill levels and interests in the group and at the same time ensure all the students felt they were treated in the same way. The groups were comprised of students with the ability to pass and those with quite poor numeracy and literacy levels. The students who struggled academically did not wish to be singled out and therefore received the same tasks as the more academically able students but struggled with them. Their difficulties meant that they often switched off and did not engage with the learning. Conversely if tasks were too basic they failed to engage the academically able students. The same tasks therefore needed to be able to cater to the abilities of all academic levels.

Activities also needed to be interesting. Some of the program's appeal for students was the mixing of general education with a vocational focus on Multimedia or Hospitality. The added vocational dimension was designed to add interest and enhance engagement. The use of technology including computers, digital audio-visual equipment and the radio station was important in generating interest and engagement.

Activities also needed to be relevant to the students' lives and the subject. Teachers adapted tasks to fit scenarios from the students' lives, such as writing letters with the intention of sending them. Tasks had more meaning than fulfilling a learning outcome for students. Students would also resist engaging with a task if they did not see the relevance it had to the subject taught. What made activities particularly relevant for the students was if the task was directly related to passing the course. Teachers regularly updated the students as to their progress and indicated what was required of them to pass.

Success

Success was not viewed as black and white by the Jumpstart team. A student's success went beyond achieving competency in the certificates students undertook. Success was determined at the individual student level. Success, viewed holistically by the team, could include:

- Achieving Certificates 1 or 2
- Being in a safe environment
- Getting to class
- Developing a routine that may enable further study
- Developing a positive relationship with an adult
- Developing a sense of achievement
- Developing a feeling of being valued
- Developing life skills
- Developing social skills
- Developing employability skills
- Developing socially acceptable behaviour
- Developing a capacity to engage in learning
- Participating in a positive educational experience.

For students however success was simpler, achieving their certificates. This did not necessarily mean that the student was engaged with the learning and focused on achieving that certificate as other problems and barriers in their lives still existed that took precedence over achieving their certificates.

Relationships

Relationships between the staff, students and the Institute were key components of the Jumpstart Program. They had both positive and negative influences on the students. The first four weeks of the program focused on building the relationships amongst the students and with the teachers.

The team believe connecting with students was vital to the success of the student and by extension the program. In student feedback, students described teachers with statements like "they really care".

The students appreciated honesty and other traits in teachers that showed they were human. Admitting that teachers could make mistakes showed students that there was hope for them as well. Knowing that teachers could be wrong sometimes made the students strive for the answers to problems just so they could prove that the teacher was wrong.

The Jumpstart Team regularly negotiated lesson plans and tasks with students. Tasks that were negotiated were frequently tackled with greater enthusiasm and motivation than other tasks.

Regular feedback about the students' progress was an important aspect of the student-teacher relationship. In addition to regular feedback from the class teachers, the Program Coordinator and Youth Participation Coordinator met with students individually at key points in the year to discuss their progress. At the end of each term the students and teachers came together and shared lunch. The lunches were important in acknowledging the students' efforts and achievements.

The Jumpstart team suggested some of the reasons the student-teacher relationship was stronger in the Jumpstart program than those formed in schools was because the lower student to teacher ratio allowed the team to provide more intensive support and more time to

build relationships. Also, the small number of students allowed the Youth Participation Coordinator to identify students who needed additional support in beginning relationships positively. The team expected a settling in period of about six months as many students had numerous obstacles and little outside support. They recognised that it "took time to build trust and respect and to demonstrate that learning could be a positive experience".

The Jumpstart team believed minimising the negative affects of relationships and interactions was an important strategy for the program. In interviews with the students, the Program and Youth Participation Coordinators assessed the personalities of the students. The program appealed to students who experienced being bullied in the school system as well as the bullies who may have been asked to leave the school system. With this type of dynamic, according to the Program and Youth Participation Coordinators, it was important to select and balance the individual groups very carefully. A frictionless balance could not always be achieved and the groups needed to be monitored closely. By scheduling classes on only three days a week per group, the number of students on campus at any one time was as low as possible. The more often that larger groups of students were together, the more likelihood of inappropriate behaviour.

Relationships with the Institute in general were also important aspects of the success of the Jumpstart Program. Some of the key relationships that needed to be fostered included the teaching department that housed the program and its Manager; Managers of other departments and the Directorate. The Jumpstart Coordinator ensured that Management staff were kept informed of issues surrounding the program with the preparation of pre-interview notes and correspondence. The strength of the relationship with the Directorate was such that the Jumpstart program received priority access with the Deputy Director of Training Delivery, should a major crisis with a student emerge.

Timing

Experience had shown for the team that students who had a break of six months or more between leaving school and commencing the Jumpstart Program had better success than those entering the program straight from school. The team believed that students with a 'gap' brought a greater maturity level and resolve to their study that enabled them to better manage the transition into this type of learning. Some students realised that this was their final chance at education and displayed less anti-social behaviour.

Students straight from school on the other hand, had no chance to reflect on their past behaviour and brought the same poor behaviours, attitudes and immaturity from one classroom to the other. For example, one student who displayed a low maturity level and attitude problem dropped out of the program in 2003. She returned to TAFE 12 months later with increased maturity and a committed attitude, completing the Certificate of General Education - Adults. Twelve months made a very significant impact on this student's success and engagement with learning. This being said, the program did not turn those students straight from school away from the program.

Staffing

The team agreed that a generous staffing level was a vital key to the program's success. The team used a variety of strategies to maximise the staffing levels in the classrooms. When lesson content made it possible, classes were scheduled together so more teachers were available to support students in their work. For example maths and media classes were scheduled together for the theory of scales. Students learnt how to determine scales through the use of scales in film and photography.

The program was also able to draw on the resources the Institute had in place to support students with diagnosed learning difficulties including Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyper Disorder (ADHD) and Dyslexia. Students with these difficulties were entitled to additional support through a teaching aide. The teaching aide assisted all the students in the class whilst discreetly assisting the diagnosed student so as not to identify that student as being different.

Finding suitable staff members for the program was difficult, as capable people willing to work with disengaged young people in the TAFE environment, and who have appropriate qualifications and experience are hard to find. Ideally the Program Coordinator believed the staff should be experienced with some staff holding a full teaching qualification, usually within the secondary or primary system, as they will have acquired the skills to manage a classroom. The team also recognised the value of vocational qualifications which some of the staff held. It helped if staff members had experience with at risk or disengaged youth, had a passion and enthusiasm for their teaching area and were determined, as teaching this cohort was demanding.

Teaching in the Jumpstart program was very demanding. It took a special type of teacher as often their attitudes, values, beliefs, self-esteem, confidence, security, self-concept and composure could be compromised. Support from management was essential for the well being of the teacher and the program, especially with success viewed differently than in other programs; teachers needed to feel that their professionalism was not under threat.

Role of the Youth Participation Coordinator

The role of the Youth Participation Coordinator in the Jumpstart Program was invaluable. She had a strong relationship with the students and was there for a chat or a laugh, available to support students in their studies as well as with personal issues. Often the presence of the Youth Participation Coordinator in the classroom had a settling affect on the students and she was an important conduit between students and teachers. In the first six months of the program the Youth Participation Coordinator dealt predominately with building relationships and harassment and bullying issues. She was able to work with students to teach living skills including how to make accommodation sharing successful, how bonds and leases work, how to prepare budgets and relate to landlords. She was able to help students with employment seeking skills such as preparing resumes and applications, interview skills and what questions to ask prospective employers. When students required it she was able to support them in finding accommodation, food vouchers, bedding and even take them grocery shopping in emergencies. The Youth Participation Coordinator linked students with welfare organisations and caseworkers as well as Centrelink resources. Towards the end of the program she discussed with students what their plans were after the program, what their goals were and what they would like to do with their lives. She was able to provide students with course information and employment skills. The Youth Participation Coordinator was not just there to support students but also provided valuable support for teachers.

Discipline

The Program Coordinator managed discipline for the Jumpstart Program with the support of the department's Manager and the Deputy Directors. The Youth Participation Coordinator would support the students through discipline issues often brainstorming strategies with them.

In addition to formal discipline procedures at the Institute, the Jumpstart team engaged a number of strategies to manage the behaviour of their students. At the beginning of the program each group negotiated with the Program and Youth Participation Coordinators to

establish a set of ground rules for the program for both teachers and students. Each student and teacher then agreed to abide by the rules, signing a contract to this effect.

Students were aware that they were studying in an adult learning environment and they accepted that. Students were not treated the same as they would in the school system and were encouraged to take responsibility for their behaviour. It was important however for the team to remember that majority of students were still 15 and 16 year olds and behaved as such. Students were treated according to the way they behaved and if they met the expectation as an adult in an adult learning environment they would be treated as such. Plenty of opportunities were available for students to meet this expectation.

One rule all the teachers utilised in some form was closing the door at 10 or 15 minutes past the scheduled beginning of the class and not allowing late students to join the group beyond this point. Students were asked to return at the beginning of the next break and use the break time to catch up on what they had missed. This was often very productive with the students engaged for the 15-minute break usually then ready to join in with the rest of the class after the break.

Remaining consistent and fair was important to maintaining discipline in the groups and students were ever watchful that the teachers remained so. If a teacher didn't treat the students equally the students were quick to note it and often challenged the teacher on it.

Teachers ensured that they started each lesson with a clean slate, with one teacher saying "If a student has been asked to leave my class until the next lesson, I start the next lesson by trying to have a positive and encouraging relationship with that student so as to foster a productive and beneficial session". Praise was usually conducted publicly or privately where appropriate, and criticism was undertaken privately.

Conclusion

Finding what works with disengaged young people is not as simple as following a recipe. Just adding a dash of discipline, a cup of support, 200gms of relationship building, a pinch of responsibility, a pound of attendance and a slosh of interest mixed carefully and baked for nine months does not a successful program make, but they all help. Through careful monitoring, flexibility and finding a balance, success in whatever form that takes, can be achieved.

The team found that successes take on many guises and are individually based. Successes could include achieving their certificates, developing social, employability, life and study skills, forming positive relationships with adults or participating in a positive educational experience, being in a safe environment or developing a capacity to engage in learning. Students usually identify success with achieving their certificates. Successes need to be acknowledged and celebrated with students.

Regular attendance proved to be one of the bigger obstacles facing the Jumpstart program with students choosing to attend or not to attend for many reasons beyond the control of the team. The team developed a number of strategies to encourage attendance and work with low attendance rates. Flexibility in the program and with attendance was very important to these strategies.

To promote engagement, the team found that students appreciated and engaged with work they perceived as relevant to their lives and their success in the program as well as of interest to them. Students did not wish to be singled out or identified as different from other students

so tasks needed to be universally undertaken despite the differing interests and levels of ability among the students. Engagement presented an ongoing challenge to the team.

Strong relationships with the team provided the students with a sense of belonging and value. The first four weeks of the program was spent as a transition and adjustment period with specific activities to promote positive relationships and ties between the students and teachers. The team endeavoured to remain honest and open with students and involved them in negotiations and decisions. The limited number of students was an important enabler in forging relationships, as were regular discussions with students on their progress. The team recognised the positive and negative effects peer interactions could have on the group and strived to balance and monitor groups. For the overall success of the program strong supportive relationships with the Institute's management and directorate staff proved important.

The team found that students who had the opportunity to reflect on their school and learning experiences for a period of 6 to 12 months away from the school system were often better equipped to succeed in the Jumpstart program. These students brought a higher level of maturity and resolve to their studies than students who entered the Jumpstart program straight from the school system. That being said, students who hadn't had that 'gap' period were not turned away from the program because of this.

Generous and flexible staffing models were found by the team to be important to the success of the program. Where possible, subjects were taught in conjunction, providing additional teaching support for students. The program was also able to draw on additional staffing resources to support students diagnosed with learning difficulties. A supportive environment for the teachers was important, as the program was very demanding of them. The team identified that teachers ideally needed to be fully qualified and experienced, particularly in classroom management, with an enthusiasm for their teaching specialty. Supporting staff through mentoring and regular debriefings was important to maintaining a stable teaching team.

The Youth Participation Coordinator played an important role in supporting teachers and students of the program. She was able to form strong relationships with students and provide them with life, social, employment and study skills. She was there to assist students with personal and welfare issues and was an important conduit between students and teachers.

The Program Coordinator with the support of the department Manager and Deputy Director, when required, primarily handled discipline. More discipline issues were experienced in 2004 than in other years of the program. The team believed this may be due to increasing the program to include a third group of students, an increase in the number of young people on campus in general, and that students were coming to TAFE with more complex issues than previously. Strategies to deal with discipline issues included the negation of ground rules at the beginning of the program that students and teachers agreed to abide by, as well as remaining consistent and fair when disciplining students.

The program's success is such that advertising beyond the course guide is no longer required as ample numbers of students approach or are referred to the program through schools or other youth agencies in the area. The Institute values the program and its transition into mainstream delivery should ensure its future viability.