

Distance-based learners navigating between remote and work-based learning contexts

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Abstract

Distance-based learners studying vocational education and training (VET) qualifications are often physically isolated from their learning facilitator/assessor and from other learners, so identifying additional remotely-located opportunities and supports, particularly in the workplace, could enhance their learning and understanding. This paper reports on some of the findings from a small-scale research project, conducted with a cohort of thirteen mature-aged work-based learners from a variety of workplaces, who completed the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (CIVTAA) by distance-based mode through CSU Training, a registered training organization (RTO).

The paper considers broadly how the learners in this study engage with and navigate between the requirements of a remote study programme conducted through an RTO and their ability to manage and negotiate their learning and assessment in real-time work-based contexts, in order to apply and further their learning. In particular, who these learners might identify and seek out/who may seek them out in the workplace to support them in their learning, how this could come about and what these 'others' may do to assist.

Finally, by examining how these distance-based learners manage and engage with their learning between remote and real-time contexts, the paper makes some small, practical suggestions about ways that CSU Training and perhaps other RTOs engaged in distance-based learning, may contribute to their current practice, or could inform future practice.

Introduction

Drawing on a small-scale research study, which aimed to investigate how authentic work-based learning and assessment could contribute to better practice, this paper considers how the distance-based learners in this study navigated between learning remotely for a qualification and identifying and utilizing work-based learning activities and interactions to benefit them in some way. As well, others in the workplace through experience or intuition may have said or done something to assist, guide or encourage the learners in their studies. The focus is on a cohort of 13 mature-aged worker-learners, who completed distance-based studies in the CIVTAA through an RTO and who directly experienced and applied their learning and assessment in work-based settings. These learners all studied with support from an RTO learning facilitator/assessor and some also had specific work-based mentors or supervisors available for guidance. While these distance-based learners undertook their studies in relative isolation from one another (Lewis, 2010) and encountered other obstacles to their learning, their own workplaces provided real-time direct, yet variable sources of practical opportunities to develop working skills and knowledge (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Billett, 2001; 2006; Eraut, 2008) and to complete authentic learning and assessment tasks. Additionally, these learners sought support from and, at times, encountered unexpected interventions and guidance within and beyond the workplace, to enhance their knowledge and practice. While the learners initiated and managed a number of their own work-based learning opportunities (for both formal and informal purposes), some workplace 'others' assisted in anticipated and, at times, in unexpected ways. This paper seeks to explore aspects of who was involved in the respondents' learning, how this involvement came about, what

these ‘others’ did and, how critical was that involvement. The focus is on how respondents in the study navigated between and responded to work-based learning supports, opportunities and obstacles, while undertaking formal studies in distance-based mode.

Literature review

In the past twenty years, there has been increasing interest in, research into and literature published on how people learn at and through work and what it is that they learn (for example, Lave & Wenger; 1991; Wenger, 1998; Boud, 1998; Boud & Garrick, 1999; Billett, 2001; 2004; 2010; Eraut, 2004; 2007; 2008; 2013). Less is known about who it is that work-based learners may seek out to assist them in their learning, or who in the workplace may seek them out and provide support; and, what it is that these others do to assist with or support the learning. Additionally, while research into uses of e-learning and assessment for practitioners and auditors (Callan & Clayton, 2010), the quality of e-assessment methods (Clayton, 2013) and the applicability of digital technologies to support isolated assessors (Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman & Roy, 2006) has applications for the ways that learners, including distance-based learners, can engage with their learning in multiple ways, there is little research into the subtleties and peculiarities of how distance-based learners manage/balance learning remotely, with learning at and through work; and, why this is important to understand.

The VET sector employs a variety of work-based learning practices, including traineeships and apprenticeships, as well as on-the-job and off-the-job programmes that integrate formal studies in different settings, with learning through work-based practice. Learning at and through work is not a new concept, as skills development through practising the occupation, is how people have traditionally learned over the centuries (Billett, 2010). What is significant for this study, is how learners navigate between the informal learning and formal learning and assessment requirements of their distance-education provider (the RTO) for a qualification, with learning on-the-job from authentic work-based practices and with varying levels and types of assistance from work-based others, to achieve that qualification.

Everyday work involves the practice and development of skills to construct knowledge. The relationship between individual and socially-located contributions to learning in the workplace is highly complex and occurs in a constantly evolving learning environment (Billett, 2006). It is this social constructivist perspective, combined with the complexity and messiness of engaging in and managing learning, both at work and at a distance, which is most relevant to this study. The sociality of work-based learning enhances our understanding about how and what learners ‘learn’, by their engaging with a variety of work-based learning opportunities, as active participants in multiple communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). By interacting with others at and through work, learners in this study construct meaning and develop understanding (Vygotsky, 1978; Eraut, 2008); yet, they also engage with a learning facilitator, albeit at a distance, directly through telephone discussions and indirectly via email messages, feedback on practices and written comments on their assessed work. These remote and work-based learning experiences establish the importance of the multiple ways in which learning occurs. Learning is not restricted to the workplace, as learners studying remotely for a qualification bring both knowledge and experience from beyond the enterprise to the job, where ‘[s]hifting boundaries, changing values and purposes of work and learning affect the physical, emotional and cognitive demands on workers at all levels’ (Boud & Garrick, 1999, p.4), including balancing and negotiating their learning remotely and in real-time learning contexts.

The construction of knowledge for respondents in this study, through direct and indirect interaction, includes discussions and collaborative decision-making, problem-solving,

impromptu chats, as well as from formal activities including assessment practices and feedback. While workplaces provide multiple and varied learning experiences (Boud & Garrick, 1999), work-based learners studying remotely for a formal qualification also demonstrate their individual agency (Billett & Pavlova, 2005; Billett, 2006) by initiating, as much as possible, their own learning opportunities and making decisions and choices about what they will learn, when they will learn, who is available to assist with the learning and who they may or may not engage with at work, to enhance and support their learning. It follows that in socially-determined work-based practices individuals decide how they participate and what they learn from their experience (Billett, 2004, p.316). Likewise, aspects of sociality when learning remotely including telephone discussions, text messaging with current and past contacts, or participating in on-line forums, can also provide opportunities for learners to make decisions about how they participate and to identify ways that they can integrate their learning into practice. Others in the workplace such as colleagues, supervisors and mentors, through experience or intuition (or both) may also identify opportunities where they may act or intervene in some way to guide, assist or comment on what is taking place for an individual. The distance-based learning facilitator can also guide and support the learner to identify useful work-based contacts. These are all social acts and it is these and other forms of engagement and, at times, interventions that are most relevant to this study.

Acquisition of knowledge and practical skills is informed by social interactions and participation in the workplace (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Boud, Cressy & Docherty, 2006) and there is also a relational interdependence between social and individual agency in learning throughout working life (Billett, 2006; Lewis, 2010). A combination of learning remotely and through the workplace to obtain a formal qualification, can add to the complexities and richness of both the individual and co-operative learning experiences of distance-based learners. While learners who study and are assessed remotely for a qualification are usually physically distanced from their formal facilitator/assessor and from other learners, indeed many distance-based learners neither communicate with nor know one another, they are located within their workplace, where they move (though not always seamlessly) between learning from everyday work experiences and interactions, to making decisions individually (and in collaboration with others) for both work-based activities and, at times, for formal studies. These individual and social contributions to learning have multi-faceted dimensions and complexities (Billett, 2006) and work-based learners who study for qualifications by distance-mode, can demonstrate the capacity to negotiate between remote and real-time learning by utilizing a variety of supports from multiple sources to manage their learning. Socio-cultural and individual contributions to learning clearly differ significantly from one another, yet these ways of learning may also share common aspects that change in response to individual, as well as situational and social influences (Lewis, 2010). This view is tempered by who may be available at a given workplace, or who may be willing to support, advise or assist a learner in some way with their studies, as workers are expected more and more to self-manage and to take responsibility for their own learning (Mackeracher, 2004). For distance-based learners, the complexities of learning remotely and in real-time for a qualification based on real workplace activities and practices, can present conflicting demands on their ability to manage their learning. Yet, obstacles encountered by distance-based learners including feelings of isolation from other learners, lack of time at work to pursue studies and little or no real-time contact with a learning facilitator, may also be balanced, to some extent, by the semi-flexible nature of distance-based learning and the variety of contacts that can be identified and may be available to support studies, within and beyond the workplace.

Workplaces require workers to learn quite specific tasks and skills for their job, which includes informal on-the-job applications and also formal learning for the acquisition of skill sets and qualifications. Some workplaces may appoint mentors to support learning, or a learner may seek out a mentor, which can have decided benefits including strengthening working relationships, yet may also have negative implications when a mentor is ‘imposed’ on a worker-learner, or is not amenable to the task, so that the learning experience can be diminished or even rejected by the worker-learner (Billett, 2003). Expressing individual agency can play an important role in distance-based learners recognizing what is advantageous for them to learn including identifying when, how and who can assist them with their learning. How learners might select and engage with opportunities to learn, both in the workplace and from remotely-located sources; and, who supports them remotely and in real-time contexts, can add to our understanding about how working knowledge is developed and how best to engage with distance-based learners.

Research methodology

A small-scale, three-part (see below) qualitative research study using ethnographic approaches (Creswell, 2007), was conducted by the author with the co-operation of CSU Training, which is the RTO of Charles Sturt University (CSU). Approval to conduct the research was obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee at CSU. Data were gathered, reduced, coded, classified, displayed in matrices and analysed (Miles & Huberman, 1994), from (a) responses to a questionnaire returned by a small sample of 13 distance-based learners, who completed the CIVTAA through CSU Training; (b) responses to individual semi-structured telephone interviews with 6 of these respondents; and (c) responses to a separate questionnaire and an individual semi-structured telephone interview with each of 3 learning facilitators from CSU Training. Transcribed interview responses were verified by respondents and all data were coded and analysed by hand. Initially, 25 past-students (from a cohort of over 100 who completed the CIVTAA) were approached by letter or email to be involved in the study. Thirteen respondents, comprising 7 males and 6 females, agreed to participate and entered the research project voluntarily. All of the respondents were mature-aged learners, with the majority aged between 31 to 45 years. A variety of work sectors were represented: horticulture, health, hospitality, adult education, trades, community services/development and policing/law enforcement. The principal job role for 5 of the respondents was in education/learning and development within their organization. The 8 remaining respondents provided some training and/or assessment as part of their overall work role. On average, it took each respondent between 12 to 18 months to complete the qualification. The highest level of formal education achieved by the respondents ranged from Certificate IV level to degree level, with 2 respondents holding post-graduate degrees. The main motivation/s for the 13 respondents to undertake the CIVTAA were: career development (6); to maintain currency of their VET teaching qualification (6); as a requirement of their organization/workplace (5); to improve current practice and update skills (4); and, because the opportunity was offered to them (2). Eleven respondents resided in urban or regional areas of Australia and 2 lived and worked overseas.

Data collection

Due to considerable geographical distances from the RTO and the researcher, a questionnaire (part A of the study) was considered to be the most practical way to obtain initial feedback from participants. The questionnaire covered five main areas or topics:

1. Personal and work details; motivation/s to complete the CIVTAA
2. How respondents learn best in their work and in their CIVTAA studies

3. Assessment methods that best support learning in the CIVTAA and why these methods are best
4. Learning through work and formal studies
 - What the learning facilitator did to assist learners and why these things assisted
 - Things in the workplace that impacted on studies and why they impacted
 - Perceived benefits to the workplace from respondents undertaking the CIVTAA
5. Social interaction in the workplace
 - Networks/contacts utilized during the CIVTAA studies
 - The most useful forms of social interaction for the CIVTAA studies
 - Perceived benefits from peer support in work-based learning.

Part B of the study comprised semi-structured telephone interviews with 6 of the 13 respondents. Questions for the telephone interviews were guided by the analysed data from part A of the study. The 6 respondents were identified principally, due to their availability to participate in the telephone interviews; and, secondarily to include as much as possible a range of ages, gender, geographical locations, work sectors and motivations for undertaking studies. Topics identified for part B of the study were:

- Three things respondents valued from their work-based learning
- How these things were developed/learned and applied
- When, how and who else was involved in the learning
- How critical was that involvement.

In part C of the study, a separate questionnaire from that completed by the principal respondents followed by individual telephone interviews were undertaken with 3 CSU Training staff, who facilitated and assessed learning in the CIVTAA by distance education mode as part of their work roles. Topics identified for part C of the study were informed by responses to parts A and B of the study:

- Personal and work details of facilitators including VET and teaching experience
- Learning and assessment methods preferred by distance-based students
- Benefits to learners in undertaking authentic work-based learning and assessment
- Most beneficial communication methods and other supports for learners
- How social interaction and involvement with others at work may assist learners and how critical is that involvement.

Other than for the name of the RTO, pseudonyms are used in the study to maintain anonymity for all of the participants and for the companies for which the principal respondents work/have worked. Limitations of the study include it being on a small scale, being conducted by one researcher, as well as work commitments encroaching on/scarcity of time for, respondents to participate in telephone or face-to-face interviews.

Findings and discussion

The findings reported here are drawn from the questionnaire and telephone interview responses with the principal respondents and with the learning facilitators. While space limits reference to all of the findings in this study, the following discussion focusses on who supported the respondents' learning for the CIVTAA at work, what these 'others' did and how this support assisted respondents.

Engaging in and responding to support in the workplace

The involvement of work-based 'others' in the principal respondents' CIVTAA studies was variously described by them as 'critical', 'essential', 'highly significant', 'invaluable' and 'motivating'. These work-based supports identified by respondents were categorized into four main groups:

- Work colleagues/peers
- Managers
- Supervisors
- Mentors/critical friends.

Support from work colleagues and peers

Not unexpectedly, the most valuable and also pragmatic support identified by all 13 respondents came from their work colleagues/peers, who were often ‘easily accessible’ and ‘gave perspective’ and ‘encouragement’. Respondents went on to identify more specifically those work-based colleagues who provided varying levels and types of support. Their responses were:

- Immediate work colleagues/peers
- Experienced colleagues with specific skills
- Role models
- A critical friend
- An informal mentor
- Colleagues from other departments within their company/organization
- Colleagues from organizations in which they had worked previously
- Contacts they met from other companies, as part of their current work role
- Friends at work who had completed the CIVTAA, or similar studies
- Learning team members (where available).

Sandra discussed how sharing thoughts and ideas about her studies with immediate work colleagues meant ‘their involvement was critical. They helped focus you on the purpose of the learning’. She also approached colleagues at work who had completed the CIVTAA and ‘used them as a sounding board by discussing ideas. When I got bogged down, they helped put it, the requirements and purpose of the course, back into perspective’. Sandra, like other respondents in the study, at times took the initiative to source assistance and was not only able to apply and practice her learning in the workplace, which helped to reinforce the knowledge gained through her studies, the ongoing support from work colleagues also enabled the learning to go more smoothly. For two of the respondents [Nadine and Trish] ‘It’s really important to be able to feed off ideas and share your thoughts with colleagues to make sure you are on the right track’ and both of these respondents were thankful to colleagues who ‘embraced the opportunity to contribute ideas and input’. By initiating work-based supports to assist with distance-based studies, or by taking up offers and/or engaging with interventions from work-based others, respondents in the study not only came to view their colleagues in a different way, they also expressed their individual agency (Billet & Pavlova, 2005) by variously negotiating, accepting, and at times not taking up offers of assistance with, or ideas or comments about, their work-based studies. This clearly demonstrates how respondents and their colleagues engaged in and contributed to real practices in their work-based communities (Wenger, 1998) including various levels and types of involvement in authentic learning tasks and assessment activities for the CIVTAA. The most useful social interactions with work colleagues for the respondents’ studies were:

- Informal exchanges and discussions
- Formal discussions while working.

Relationships with work colleagues strengthened for Tara as a direct result of her undertaking her CIVTAA studies through her work:

By getting the involvement of other staff members, the other staff saw direct benefit of what I was doing and it interested them and then they got involved and asked

questions. They saw the importance of workplace learning and I benefitted from their participation ... Colleagues supported and reviewed, they gave feedback. When developing things, I ran things past them. We would talk in the tearoom, talk formally and informally.

In summary, these work-based interactions were central to the respondents' learning because they allowed for the sharing of skills, knowledge and ideas with colleagues in real-time, assisted in improving relations and communication with others and also generated feelings of motivation and encouragement between respondents and fellow workers. Respondents in this study not only shared ideas, they were also able to learn from more experienced others and discuss problems and issues relating to their studies and also to find workable solutions. The learning that ensued from this collaborative approach to the CIVTAA studies had an additional, significant outcome for Tara:

One of the biggest things was I learnt to listen in a different way. Listen to all the cues that can come from others, from formal and informal cues. Listen to what people really mean, take on feedback and do something with it and review it.

The deeper level of learning for this respondent demonstrates the capacity of work-based studies to provide more than the formal requirements needed to complete a qualification. The experience of shared learning, with support from various colleagues in the workplace developed skills and attributes in Tara that also carried over into everyday practices.

Support from work-based 'others'

Apart from work-based colleagues who supported the learning, 'others' in the workplace, including managers, supervisors, mentors, peers in other departments and assessor team members, also supported the respondents in a variety of important and practical ways:

- By giving advice/sharing information
- Providing or enabling acquisition of resources, or access to specific people/departments within the organization (gatekeepers)
- Giving feedback on formal assessment tasks (for example, when respondents delivered sessions to groups, or participated in assessment validation sessions)
- Acting as a sounding board
- Collaborating on tasks and projects
- Mentoring
- Giving of their time to assist a learner.

All of the respondents utilized work-based networks and/or social contacts to some extent to support their CIVTAA studies and firmly indicated that their studies would not have been possible without this workplace support. This support became even more critical, as most respondents experienced feelings of isolation, when there was often a lack of formal workplace support for or during their studies and, where their only other study contact was remotely with the learning facilitator. Zoe, one of the learning facilitators, discusses the significance of workplace support for distance-based learners:

Involvement of others in the workplace in their learning and studies is really important especially with the Cert IV. To do it well, there MUST be support mechanisms in the workplace. There is no way they could do it without a strong support mechanism, for example, a mentor or a willing environment to practice in. They need relationships somewhere in the workplace to be able to achieve.

In some instances, the respondents approached others in the workplace directly to seek advice, guidance or assistance including from experienced co-workers, mentors and 'gate-

keepers'. At other times, work-based 'others' including supervisors, contacts in other departments and peers who had previously completed the CIVTAA studies intervened or offered advice and practical help to support respondents. Ned explains how his supervisor 'believed in me and had confidence in my ability. They supplied resources and gave me time away from work tasks to undertake coaching and training duties' for his CIVTAA studies, while Harry's regional manager 'advised others to contact me to help and offer advice'. Trish found assistance was forthcoming from 'the training arm of my organization, as they shared some of their processes and information with me' and Tom was able to participate in 'some discussions with colleagues in departments based in other areas, to get cross-pollination of ideas'. These supports and interventions, at times collaborative and at other times initiated and directed by various individuals, enabled respondents to make decisions about how and when they would learn and who they would engage with to further their studies. While the level and depth of support and guidance varied between respondents, all of the respondents were assisted and supported at work in some capacity, to enable real-time learning to take place. This undoubtedly assisted in making the distance-based learning experience more relevant and achievable for all respondents, rather than from studying remotely with only a single learning facilitator to rely on and engage with, to complete the CIVTAA studies. It is important to note that, for the majority of the respondents in this study, there was no contact with other distance-based learners at CSU Training who were studying the CIVTAA at the same time, so the various workplace supports that they encountered, arranged, initiated, were provided with, or at times happened upon, were indeed vital to their successful completion of the qualification.

Conclusion

This paper identifies the workplace as a potentially rich source of support for distance-based learners studying remotely through an RTO. A critical focus for RTOs in collaboration with their remotely-located learners should be on identifying those individuals in the workplace who may be valuable sources of advice, support, timely interventions or guidance; and, also recognizing opportunities that can be arranged or taken up by learners, as well as considering serendipitous interventions that present themselves in the course of their studies.

Practical implications

The principal respondents in this study demonstrated their individual agency and engagement in their remotely-located learning for the CIVTAA by variously and, at times selectively, engaging in learning opportunities that were sought out by them, or were presented to them from (a) immediate work colleagues and also (b) particular work-based 'others'. Therefore, some practical suggestions arising from the study, about additional ways that CSU Training and perhaps other RTOs could further support distance-based learners and, which may inform future practice are:

- At the commencement of an individual's learning programme, the learning facilitator and the learner could work together to identify specific work-based (and other) contacts who may be available and willing to guide and assist the learner, by using a simple checklist (see Appendix 1)
- The learning facilitator to collaborate with each learner to advise on and tailor the sequence of CIVTAA units studied and the associated assessment tasks, to align with actual work activities in each learner's workplace
- To encourage learners to source specific work-based 'others', to assist in identifying and using actual work practices as the basis for completing formal assessment tasks, rather than considering or relying on simulated activities to complete some of these tasks.

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Appendix 1

Checklist of Contacts for Study Support

As your distance-based learning facilitator, I will be working with you to undertake your studies in the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment. All of the learning and assessment tasks for this qualification are based around real activities that you already do, or will engage in, at your workplace.

Below is a checklist of some work-based (and other) contacts that may be available and willing to support, assist and guide you with your studies. You may also think of others that you can include.

Title	Tick	Name/s	How they may assist
General/company manager			
Section/division manager			
Supervisor			
Mentor (formal/informal)			
Coach			
Immediate colleagues/peers			
Experienced colleagues			
Colleagues who have completed the Cert IV TAA			
Role model/s			
Specific peer/s			
Critical friend			
Contacts in other areas/departments			
Learning team member/s			
Person/s who can provide permission or access for completing work-based learning and assessment tasks			
Other learning facilitator/s			
Relevant contacts from other organizations/workplaces			
Previous employer			
Other			