

Enriching the learning experience in workplace settings through partnership

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Abstract

How do you enrich the learning experience in workplace settings? This question is of particular interest to a group of Vocational Education and Training (VET) practitioners in the Community Services sector, as they take a collaborative journey with industry in the design of learning and assessment for the Advanced Diploma of Disability Work. The Program Advisory Group comprising service providers, industry-based students and VET teachers recognise their dual roles of *practitioner/teacher* and *learner* in the process, helping each other to identify the kinds of skills the industry requires at this level and how best to develop (or recognise) these skills within a group of highly experienced employees in the Disability Services field.

This paper will report on the experience of the various stakeholder groups, including the testing of assumptions around the learning process and the specific needs of industry-based students. The paper will also explore the outcomes of partnership, in terms of enriching our understanding of a learning community, that transcends traditional models of program development and delivery, namely those that centre around teacher or educator as ‘expert’.

Introduction

The National Strategy for VET identifies raising the skills profile of the VET workforce through engagement with industry and community, as integral to the achievement of strategic goals for the Australian VET sector for the period 2004-2010. It is widely recognised that the boundaries between educational institutions and contemporary workplaces are shifting and that VET providers need to embrace new approaches to the design, development and delivery of training. Engagement with industry clients to contextualise programs and expand the range and level of qualifications to meet the skill needs of industry, is identified as a key component of VET reform (Chappell 2003, ANTA 2003).

The Ministerial Statement on the future of the Victorian VET system, “*Knowledge and Skills for the Innovation Economy*” focuses on “*repositioning*” VET within the global knowledge economy. Training providers are encouraged to “*...engage with new clients, customise their products more effectively, and broaden the range of courses and qualifications available*” (Kosky 2002:9). In response to government priorities for industry engagement and the design of new pedagogy across the sector, teachers at RMIT University are involved in designing learning and assessment in conjunction with partner organisations, “*blurring the boundaries*” between teaching, research and consultancy and between the university and external stakeholders.

Background to the Project

This paper outlines an innovative flexible learning initiative to design, develop, pilot and evaluate a learning and assessment model for the Advanced Diploma of Disability Work, a new qualification introduced in the revised National Community Services Training Package. The project has been designed to provide opportunities for learning development and growth of the disability services workforce, consistent with the Victorian State Disability Plan 2002 – 2012 and the Department of Human Services Learning and Development Strategy for the sector. Strengthening the workforce through skills development and fostering a sustainable learning culture in and across both government and non-government disability service agencies, is considered to be critical to improving outcomes of service provision for people with a disability (Victorian Government Department of Human Services:2002).

The target group for this project was staff and management working at advanced practitioner and supervisory levels, in both government and non-government disability services. The introduction of the Advanced Diploma qualification has been anticipated by the disability services sector for some time. Under the Intellectual Disability Services Certified Agreement 2001, the new qualification is the minimum requirement for staff seeking to progress to senior job classifications.

At the centre of this initiative, is a partnership-based approach to program design and development. This model recognises the high value of collaborative input in relation to the quality of learning and assessment processes and outcomes. This was highlighted by the work of Simons et al. (2003), which looked at innovation across a number of different training packages. They found that strategies which facilitated early involvement of industry, “on an equal basis” with the training provider, fostered ownership and responsibility. The partnership approach can thus decrease the reliance on the training provider as ‘expert’, diffusing the risk associated with high-level innovation. A conceptual map of the partnership model showing the specific roles of each stakeholder in the design process is provided below.

Advanced Diploma in Community Services - Disability Work Learning and Assessment Model

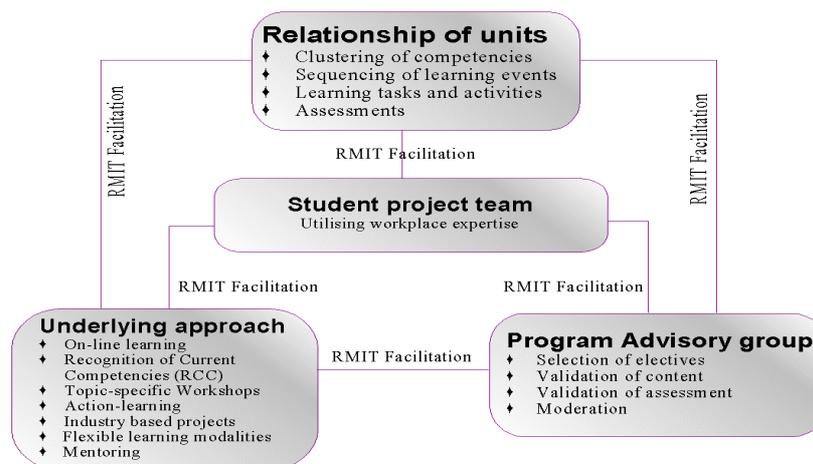


Figure 1. Model of Partnership

Features of the learning and assessment model

The work integrated approach underpinning this innovation is grounded in constructivist learning theory and the notion that “...*meaning is constructed by the learners, not by the teachers; and that learning is anchored in the context of real-life situations and problems*” (Imel 2000:1). The model emphasises the relationship between organisational development and capability building, and career-long learning and the aspirations of individual learners. Workers and their managers refocus on existing work systems and identify new learning needs and skills upgrade requirements, within the framework of the endorsed training package qualification.

Elements of competency are interpreted in the workplace context and student/workers engage in dialogue that is guided by the teacher/facilitator around their interpretation of competence and the application of knowledge and skills. Competence is shaped through praxis-based processes - theory informs practice and vice versa. This supports ongoing development of critical thinking and reflexive ability. Students participate in a process of framing holistic assessment tasks, against clusters of competencies based on the requirements of their workplace context and practice. A range of evidence to support recognition of current competency is also identified.

The findings in this paper are presented from the perspective of a central Educational Design mentor and the Social and Community Services Head of Department at RMIT University, both involved in this project.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation used qualitative methods in the collection and analysis of stakeholder feedback. The following section provides a brief description of each group of stakeholders (or partners) and the data collection processes used.

Program Advisory Group

The Program Advisory Group comprised 10 industry stakeholders, representative of both government and non-government agencies in the disability sector and the Health and Community Services Union. The group also included RMIT University staff associated with the project (program facilitators, Head of Department and a central educational design mentor), each providing different yet complementary perspectives. The Program Advisory Group met on 5 occasions, with an average attendance rate of 75%. The group’s primary role was to validate the proposed work integrated model and identify issues that might impact upon its suitability and effectiveness. In addition to formative data gathered during group meetings, a questionnaire was distributed to all members, inviting them to report on their involvement in the project. This enquiry aimed to identify:

- ?? the initial motivators for involvement
- ?? industry expectations of the process
- ?? the strengths and weaknesses of the work integrated approach underpinning the advanced diploma, and
- ?? perspectives on the RMIT University partnership model and what has been learnt through the experience.

Pilot student group

A pilot program was offered to a group of 20 students, all currently employed in the disability sector in supervisor or co-ordinator roles, with an average of 15 years experience in the field. The pilot played a significant role in further developing the overall model and learning and assessment strategies. A student feedback survey was distributed to students at the end of the first semester, focussing on:

- ?? personal learning styles
- ?? motivators to enrol in the pilot program
- ?? participant expectations
- ?? perspectives on personal responsibilities in undertaking the program
- ?? nature of support provided by participants' employers
- ?? personal challenges, and
- ?? strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Twelve participants completed the survey.

Note: 3 students from the commencing group of 20 withdrew during the first semester.

Findings and discussion

Initial motivators and expectations

Members of the Program Advisory Group were collectively motivated by the need to ensure responsive training provision, believing that meaningful training outcomes could only be achieved through collaborative relationships between training providers, industry and unions. All partners saw this project as an opportunity to steer the design of a new qualification recently introduced to the sector, believing it would make a significant contribution to strengthening the professionalism of disability work.

Participants in the student pilot reported enhanced career prospects, access to higher pay, increased skills and knowledge and personal development as being key motivators for their involvement. Initial expectations of participants about the learning and assessment processes tended to vary, with some participants reporting that they were “*open-minded*” and others indicating they were unsure about what to really expect. Some participants expected their current skills and knowledge to be formally recognised or incorporated into the program. Some participants thought the program would be more structured with project requirements. Participants in general, were able to clearly articulate what they saw as their personal responsibilities in the program.

The facilitators of the pilot initially felt extremely positive believing “*the whole thing would work*”. There was a sense of excitement that the students would be taking control of the experience. The ‘taking of control’ and what this means in the current context will be further discussed. The facilitators believed that the work integrated focus was central to “*bringing life*” to the training package, where teachers and students would take a partnered journey in discovering the potential of the package ie, what it might mean for students in their workplaces and framing appropriate learning and assessment pathways.

Major strengths and weaknesses of the work-integrated learning & assessment model
Positive features of the model as viewed by industry stakeholders included:

- ?? flexible model providing an alternative to single mode, on campus delivery
- ?? integration of competencies and project based learning as better reflecting real workplace environments and increasing relevancy for participants
- ?? mix of government and non-government partners as a means of broadening and sharing perspectives across the disability sector.

Feedback from students in the pilot reported strengths of the program from both a personal and professional perspective. The opportunity to network, meet other “*like-minded*” people as well as challenging and broadening understandings, and making new friendships were all highly valued by participants. The opportunity for self-assessment and the building of an evidence portfolio resulted in a sense of personal achievement for participants and a realisation of the skills and knowledge they already have, and use in their professional lives. The appeal of work-integrated models is similarly reported by Keevers & Outhwaite (2002), who examined work-based learning in the Community Services sector.

The students in the pilot viewed contributing to the design of assessment including the actual processes and tasks, as advantageous. While initial expectations of participants were mixed, there appeared to be a common appreciation of the purpose of the pilot in helping to further refine and shape the underpinning learning and assessment processes. One participant reported that after further clarification and ongoing exposure to the process, they were now finding it “*challenging, motivating and rewarding*”. The current student retention rate of 85% is a positive indicator of student satisfaction, with only one student withdrawing on the basis that the program was not meeting their needs.

From a program facilitator’s perspective, it was critical to fully understand the role of “*true facilitation*”. The notion of the student ‘taking control’ needs to be understood in the context of the facilitator role as guiding yet providing clear structures, so that the student feels sufficiently confident when they make a decision in the learning process. Flexibility is not about “*anarchy*”. It’s more about “*who has the focus and when*”, perhaps best illustrated when students offer “*...excellent facilitators who provide great direction and clear expectations...they don’t talk at us and include the class*”. Mitchell and Young (2001) point out the impact of the flexible leaning agenda on the role and identity of the traditional classroom teacher, where the teacher’s role is being transformed to that of “*manager of learning and a facilitator*”. Reframing the role of teacher to that of facilitator, perhaps requires a different kind of expertise, one that Raab (1994), in her work around organisation consulting, talks about an expertise in ‘not knowing’, a capacity to stay with the intolerable tensions of uncertainty, in order to arrive at new insights and learning. Although facilitators in the pilot showed a willingness to operate in this way, it should be acknowledged that not all practitioners are suited, nor equipped to manage highly complex and flexible learning environments. It is more about having the “*right staff mix*” and enabling collegial work as new terrain is navigated.

While the level of flexibility inherent in the model was seen to be appealing, it was also problematic to manage - for students, workplaces and the training provider. Student feedback clearly indicated that time management was an issue, where balancing high-pressure workplaces and non-standard working hours with study commitments, presented as a significant challenge. This was more problematic for regionally based students travelling to weekend workshops and finding time to meet as a smaller learning group.

An initial obstacle for students was in understanding the requirements of the units of competence and designing workplace assessment tasks across multiple competencies. However, participants became more confident and clearer about the assessment processes with ongoing engagement. The inherent flexibility of work-integrated learning is coupled with ambiguity. Participants can feel daunted and apprehensive by the lack of conventional structure and control, as they begin to engage with the unfamiliar. Simons et al. (2003) in their research on innovative learning and assessment, highlight that training packages challenge traditional “*attitudes, values, beliefs and norms*” about learning and assessment and that students need to develop new strategies to cope with new or different demands. They need to learn ‘new ways to learn’.

The evaluation highlighted that a major challenge for work-based learning is building commitment from employers to support staff studying in highly flexible modes. The work of Keevers & Outhwaite (2002) and Johnston & Hawke (2002), assert that collaborative models, coupled with supportive workplaces, were critical to determining the level of success. Other factors identified as being valuable included an analysis of workplace culture, access to skilled workplace personnel to guide the learner through the process and team-based approaches to customise resources and training. Although inconsistent across the pilot, workplace support included time release, study leave, contributions to program-related costs, supportive line manager and access to workplace resources eg, computers and the Internet. Further investigation is required to determine the kinds of support that enable a fuller engagement in the learning and development experience (those that go beyond the more traditional responses) and the role of each partner in their establishment.

While students in the pilot embraced the opportunity of directing their own learning and assessment, the degree and means by which learning took place requires further scrutiny, with one facilitator commenting that the model is “*too task/outcomes focussed*”. The processes to recognise current competence need to be reconciled with a stronger focus on the development of knowledge that is context specific. Put another way, it is the experience of the pilot that the building of an evidence portfolio and negotiated assessments, must provide clearer opportunities to identify individual learning needs and framing appropriate learning paths. This is supported by Keevers & Outhwaite (2002), finding that the design of assessment and recognition processes needs to be intrinsically linked to the worker’s learning and ongoing professional development if the experience is to be successful. They go on to say that “*this means focussing on recognition as a process to support work-based learning rather than (just) upfront assessment*”. However, the use of recognition processes (RCC/RLP) raises the problem of assessing underpinning knowledge, attitudes, ethics and values - all important components of higher level competence and which need to be addressed by the assessment process (Foreman et al., 2003). The trouble is that much of what is

known and understood is often implicit and not easily measured or observed. Any shift in the focus of this current innovation, must also explicitly consider the assessment and application of underpinning knowledge.

Program facilitators reported the lack of resources and enabling workplace practice as significant factors in limiting the actual potential of the innovation, a finding well documented in the flexible learning literature (Simons et al., 2003; Palmieri, 2003). There was an absence of existing learning materials in the Disability sector that might be tailored to suit different circumstances. While the program team was capable of developing new resources, particularly online materials, time and adequate administrative support were scarce.

Internal model of partnership

The program team at RMIT University did however receive educational design and consultancy support from a centralised group, representing an internal model of partnership. A variety of support was made available involving ‘upfront contracting’ or negotiation of role and activity and respecting the expertise and driving contribution of the program team. The partnership was seen to operate as a Community of Practice, where the experience often generated new enquiries (Wenger, 1998). The partnership model recognised the diversity in learning styles and ways of working. The educational design mentor assisted practitioners in developing or refreshing, their consultancy capacity to promote connections with industry. Perhaps the greatest strength of working in partnership is the workplace-based, action learning orientation, reported by Mitchell and Young (2001) as being a preferred form of learning amongst VET professionals. The partnership model also offers capacity to impact beyond the immediate innovation or topic of interest, with new insights and skills being transferred to new work requirements.

Some future work

Recognising the formative nature of this innovation, it might also be useful to provide a broader context for ongoing evaluation. Student feedback questionnaires will be supplemented by focus group discussions, providing an opportunity for an extended dialogue between students and facilitators, as experience with the new delivery model deepens. Data collection from the industry will focus on the issue of workplace support and a provider network will be utilised to share different practices in program design, implementation and evaluation. In 2004, RMIT University will also offer the Advanced Diploma regionally and to an on-campus group. This will present a broader opportunity to explore the tailoring of different delivery models for different student cohorts and the respective impacts on the learning process.

Conclusions

Laying the foundation for innovation – what are the critical conditions?

Organisations wanting to undertake innovation that results in highly flexible options for its clients, must first develop an appreciation of the paradox or competing tensions surrounding the work, characterised by:

- ?? 'letting go' of the learning agenda vs. sufficient guidance and focus
- ?? single learner vs. multiple learners ie, dual roles of practitioner/learner, facilitator/learner, industry/learner and diverse expectations
- ?? high fit/high satisfaction vs. low fit/low satisfaction
- ?? innovation and creativity vs. high levels of compliance, low levels of risk taking and organisation inflexibility
- ?? debilitating vs. empowering.

The pilot presents organisations with challenges around how to establish and nurture partnerships that have the capacity to add value and transform. The dilemma also remains in building commitment from employers, in ways that alleviate contingencies and deepen the learning, as well as enhancing access. Providers of training must also pay adequate attention to orientating students around flexible learning and assessment. Prospective students require information about non-traditional delivery and the associated realities, so they are better placed to make decisions around the most suitable option. Indeed, not all students have the high-level management skills and ability to engage in reflective learning demanded by the innovation underpinning the Advanced Diploma of Disability Work.

Strengthening the sector overall – through partnership

Integral to this collaborative approach is a commitment by the VET program team to practitioner research as an effective way of improving the quality of VET and its management. The strengthening of an already existing reflexive learning culture among a group of educators, will increase the team's capacity to critically reflect on their own skills and knowledge. Collaboration assists practitioners to identify areas for improvement and respond to the changing nature of work in the VET sector (Lomax 1996).

Through involvement in the project, the RMIT University program team is identifying emerging organisational, administrative and management support issues required of inter-professional collaboration. It is recognised that if true collaboration is to be achieved, a level of reciprocity is required of industry partners in taking up equal shares of the work. This must be facilitated through the clear specification of role and function, effective organisation and management and the ability to adjust or refocus as the work evolves. While wanting to be seen as 'equal partners', training providers must take care in not abdicating from their leadership role around workplace learning. Again, clear communication and focussed leadership at critical times is required to ensure that the boundaries don't become 'too blurred'.

Real and genuine consultation is a demanding process, requiring skilled professionals who can contain the different expectations and beliefs held by the different stakeholders and being able to affirm that in the end, not all expectations are likely to be met. But through a collaborative enquiry, each stakeholder is able to develop a deeper appreciation of the varying contexts, limitations and opportunities that characterise the sector. The very process of collaboration is perhaps the most challenging aspect of innovation, relying on partners bringing themselves to the work as both 'learners and experts'.

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