

Learning from the learner: exploring the relationships between workplace culture and workplace learning

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Abstract

For the past three years a group of VET practitioners from the RMIT School of International and Community Studies has worked collaboratively with industry in the delivery of the Certificate IV in Community Services (Disability Work) to staff currently employed in a major institutional facility for people with disabilities. The employment of action research in the planning, delivery and evaluation of competency based training has identified the importance of critical reflection and continual adjustment in workplace training provision. This process of constant reflection has revealed a complex web of interrelated and interdependent cultural mores that underpin not only the work environment, but also the learning context. This paper will report on how this knowledge has been used to reinvent training and assessment processes to workplace cultural specificities. The utilisation of narrative centred learning methodology to achieve successful learner driven outcomes will also be discussed.

Background to the project

The imperative to significantly improve the quality of service provision for people with a disability has been the major driver of an ambitious workplace training initiative in the Victorian government disability services sector. The Disability Learning and Development Project, which commenced in March 2002, was designed to provide opportunities for learning development and growth of the disability services workforce, a priority identified in the Victorian State Disability Plan 2002-2012 (Victorian Government Department of Human Services:2002).

Consistent with the move to improve client service provision, the enterprise agreement relating to the employment of state government disability direct care workers, the Intellectual Disability Services Certified Agreement 2001, set the Certificate IV in Community Services (Disability Work) as the minimum qualification for staff working in direct care roles in government disability services sector.

To comply with the requirement for improved skills and knowledge of evidenced in minimum qualifications for direct care staff, the Victorian Department Human Services (DHS) through the learning and development project has involved 1200 staff across nine DHS regions in Victoria in a work-based traineeship program to achieve the Certificate IV in Community Services (Disability Work). Workplace training delivery and assessment services for the statewide program have been provided by a consortium of eleven Registered Training Organisations (RTO's).

The learning and assessment model for the traineeship program was designed through a collaborative process involving the DHS Disability Learning and Development Unit and key teaching and program coordination staff from consortium member RTO's. This "partnership approach" to program design and development sought to recognise the needs of a range of stakeholders in the project including trainees within the context of their workplace. The initial model involved up-front assessment of current competency of trainees combined with the delivery of structured on-site training workshops and on-the-job assessment of participants in their workplaces.

Consistency of program delivery and approaches to competency development and assessment through the use of standardised learning and assessment tools and resources was identified in the original project brief as a requirement of the statewide training program. At the same time, it was also recognised that regional differences across the nine DHS regions would result in the need for further customisation of the mode of delivery and learning and assessment activities. This was due to the particular requirements of some worksites, the context of disability accommodation service provision and the needs of the client group.

The scope and complexity of the workforce training initiative have demanded of the VET staff teams working with consortium RTO's a high level of expertise in workplace training pedagogy combined with current, relevant industry knowledge and experience. The ambitious disability workforce training project discussed in this paper has highlighted some of the many challenges for training providers and VET practitioners in the design and delivery of large scale, highly contextualised and flexibly delivered workplace training and assessment programs.

The paper outlines the use of a team based action research approach over a three year period by the RMIT disability training team to build new pedagogical skills and the broad contextual knowledge required to effectively engage workers in an institutional setting in workplace learning. The relationship between workplace culture and workplace learning, and the way in which narrative centered learning has emerged as a method of learner engagement, is also discussed.

Workplace learning and developing VET practitioner capability

The Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) promotes the VET sector as having a strategic role in supporting industries to develop innovative and creative responses to the challenges of operating in new and changing work contexts. A recent draft report on the skills development needs of workers in the Community Services and Health industries has identified the VET system as having a major role in skills development for unqualified workers in the sector and in defining solutions to emerging workforce issues (ANTA 2004).

While upgrading workplace skills through contextualised workplace training and credentialing of individual direct care workers has been a primary focus of the DHS Disability Learning and Development Project, workplace cultural change to encourage

and support improved work practices has also been a strategic goal of the initiative. There is an expectation that enhanced knowledge and skills of direct care staff combined with a qualified workforce will result in the attitudinal and organisational changes required to significantly improve the quality of client service provision within government disability accommodation services. According to the Victorian State Plan for Disability Services 2002-2012, *“the Victorian Government wants disability supports to focus on supporting people with a disability in flexible ways, based on their individual needs, so that each person can live the lifestyle that they want to lead”* (Victorian Government Department of Human Services 2002:12).

The need for the RMIT disability training practitioners to effectively respond to both the broad strategic goals of the statewide project and the immediate training and assessment requirements of 320 direct care staff working in institutional settings was the imperative behind a collegiate, team based action research approach to new program design, delivery and evaluation. It was clearly not an option to simply overlay conventional face to face training delivery onto the workplace setting. At the same time the framework for implementing the work-based training and assessment model in a complex workplace context with a large number of trainees had to be quickly but solidly constructed. In the words of the then program coordinator, reflecting on the challenges of implementing the disability traineeship program, *“the book hadn’t been written.”* Recent research on emerging policy issues and the changing demands of VET, as reported by Noonan *“...emphasises the importance of workplaces as sites of learning and highlights the challenge work-based learning poses to traditional forms of codified learning delivered through education and training institutions”* (2003:2).

It has been widely acknowledged that collaborative work practices involving practitioner action research and action learning methodologies can assist educators to negotiate new teaching and learning environments (Lomax 1996, Winter 1989, Kemmis and McTaggart 1988). According to Mitchell, Henry and Young *“...an effective approach for achieving these twin goals of workplace training capability and associated supportive culture within training provider organizations is to provide the opportunity for training provider staff to experience structured workplace training/learning themselves”* (2001:5) Marginson has identified that within the VET sector itself the *“...construction of an ongoing reflexive learning culture”* is essential if practitioners are to reorient their practice to new training contexts (2000:26).

The response by consortium RTO’s to the original DHS Disability Learning and Development Project brief predicted the challenges the project would provide for disability training teams responsible for program implementation. At the outset, the need for development of a community of practice and the employment of action research methodologies to ensure ongoing review and evaluation as part of a feedback loop into a statewide training management process was identified. The formation of communities of practice as defined by Wegner (1998a,1998b) has been promoted by ANTA as tool for *“...transferring knowledge and developing professional skills”* to meet staff development and change management needs in the VET sector (Mitchell, Wood and Young 2001:3).

The training delivery model for the project dictated the employment by RMIT of a team of trainers and assessors under varying contractual arrangements. Team members were selected according to a range of criteria including industry knowledge and the currency of disability work related experience and willingness and capacity to negotiate new and flexible learning and assessment environments. A commitment to ongoing professional development and cooperative activities involving learning, research and innovation to further build VET practitioner capabilities in the disability sector were considered to be essential requirements for inclusion in the RMIT disability training team.

The action learning set was comprised of the six newly recruited disability training practitioners with the disability program coordinator taking on the role of facilitator. Carr and Kemmis support the appointment of a facilitator from within the group pointing out that “... *an outsider taking such a role persistently would actually undermine the group’s collaborative responsibility for the process*” (1986:204). Team members entered into a cycle of learning as a comprehensive action plan was developed to guide the group through the maze of activities necessary to implement the traineeship program within a short time frame. As the learning and assessment model would require all training and assessment activities to be carried out at the worksite and focus on one-on-one interaction between trainer and learner, trainers would be working in relative isolation from their colleagues. It was expected that the action learning set would provide the forum for reflective learning where trainers could make sense of their experiences in a complex workplace learning environment through conceptualising their work. This was necessary in order to refine and contextualize the learning and assessment model to ensure the expected learner outcomes. The approach is consistent with action research principles and practices as described by Carr and Kemmis who point out that “...*in the action research process, reflection and action are held in dialectical tension, each informing the other through a process of planned change, monitoring, reflection and modification*” (1986:205).

Workplace learning and the learning context

It is well documented in contemporary research on work-based training and assessment that the success of industry based training hinges on a number of critical factors. The work of Ridoutt, Dutneal, Hummel & Smith (2002), Lave (1990) Lave and Wenger (1991) and Billet (2000) illustrate the importance of knowing not only the learner, but also the context in which the learning is to take place. Moreover, it is the interrelated and interdependent cultural mores that underpin not only the work environment, but also the learning context, that must be understood. Billet (2000:6) argues that “*learning is not wholly mandated by workplace affordances. Instead, the agency of individuals determines the means of engagement and response to guidance.*”

At the commencement of the Disability Learning and Development Project it became immediately apparent that a vast number of factors would be at play when undertaking a work-based training program on such a large scale. An initial activity of the action learning set involved mapping the learning context to predict and identify factors that could impact on the learning program.

Figure 1 below details the complexity of the learning environment. The RMIT training team was required to negotiate this web of complex relationships and at the same time contextualise the learning and assessment program within a workplace environment that was not only institutionalized but also under redevelopment, with staff and residents relocating to community based services.

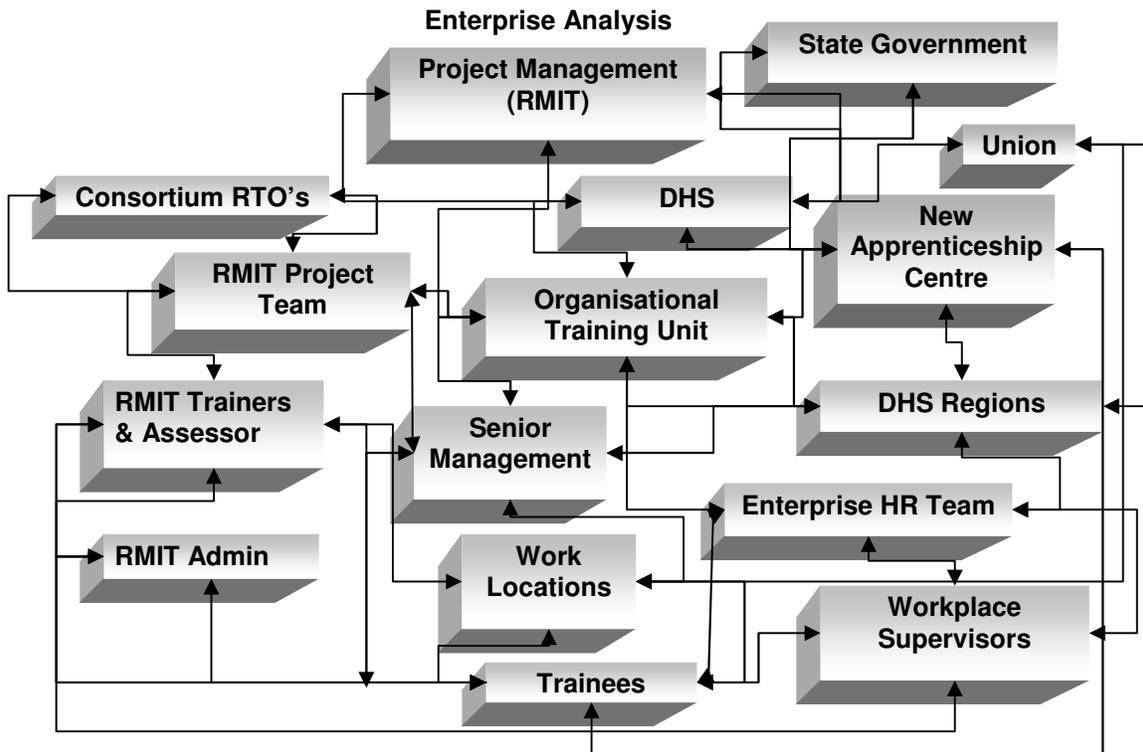


Figure 1. The complexity of the learning environment

Planning for this project required extensive analysis and interpretation of the workplace and learner factors. Information pertaining to these factors was sought from the industry management team, or was predicted by the training team. Strategies were devised to manage logistical difficulties and resources were developed to ensure consistency in delivery, on both micro (individual learner) and macro (statewide involving all RTO's) levels.

Knowing the learner

Profiling the learners was not possible prior to the commencement of the project as participants registered through an expression of interest process with their employer. Furthermore, participants were not required to meet any academic prerequisites and all expressions of interest were accepted if they met the government traineeship requirements.

Initial planning and resource development for the program was based on a number of assumptions. Firstly, it was assumed that the delivery of the training would involve a large proportion of Recognition of Current Competency (RCC). This assumption was derived from analysis of the learner's job description, which outlines the specific knowledge, skills and attitudes required of staff employed to support people with disabilities within the Department of Human Services. This was then cross referenced with key performance criteria from the specific units of competency the learners were undertaking. Accordingly, it was held that the learners would obtain recognition of their existing knowledge and skills, with the remainder of the training program consisting of flexibly delivered on and off-the-job training customised to individual learner gaps in knowledge and skills.

Despite the efforts of planning prior to the implementation of the training program, it was the unique workplace cultural specificities, those factors that were not immediately apparent at the commencement of the project, that posed the greatest challenge to the success of the training program. It was soon to be revealed that which was thought to be predictable was not as it was expected to be and the unpredictable was far more complex than ever imagined. The repeated process of review, reflection and response by the training team revealed a complex web of relationships and group dynamics underpinning not only the work environment, but also the learning context.

The training team identified a number of barriers that potentially prohibited access to learning opportunities. These included the micro management of staff, with many layers of management and demarcation of roles and responsibilities in accordance with job classification and tenure. Consequently many learners did not have the opportunity to develop or demonstrate all of the skills and knowledge assumed during the program planning phase. This was a significant finding as it was envisaged that the learners would possess the necessary skills to perform all of their job requirements in accordance with their job description. To complicate matters further, many of the learners were also identified as having significant language and literacy issues. It was revealed through the RCC process that a significant number of staff involved in the training program did not possess the fundamental literacy skills to perform all of their job requirements, let alone undertake a training program that required frequent demonstrations of literacy competency. The most significant barrier identified was the specific culture within the institutional context in which the learners were employed. The training team was to discover that complex historical, philosophical and interpersonal factors wove a web of interrelated and interdependent cultural mores, amplified by the redevelopment of the institution.

These complexities posed a great challenge for the training team and learners alike. In the absence of a wide range of workplace practice opportunities for trainees, the training team was faced with the task of creating a learning environment geared towards success within these identified cultural specificities. The action research process became critical for the training team in determining a strategy to engage the learners within the program. Trainers were required to be highly responsive to the individual needs of each and every learner. At this point one team member chose to leave the project due to the significant personal and professional challenges of working with a highly individualised approach to learning and assessment. The willingness and capacity of the trainers to negotiate new and flexible learning and assessment methodologies proved to be the vital ingredient to successful learner outcomes. Figure 2 below illustrates the learner focused strategy employed by the training team. The relationship between the learner and the trainer is essentially one of cooperation and flexibility.

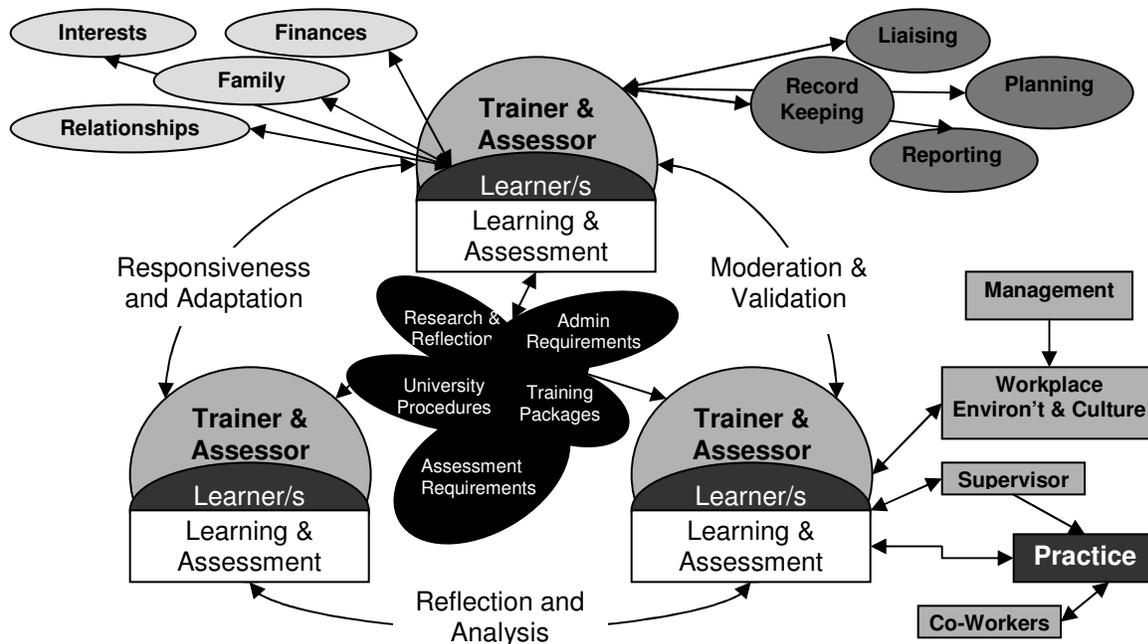


Figure 2: Learner focused training and assessment model

Reconstructing the learning environment

The process of reflection and review of training and assessment practices by the training team revealed a compelling solution to the difficulties faced working within this complex environment. The trainers frequently reported that many of the trainees shared with them their fears and frustrations, as they struggled to engage with the learning and assessment requirements of the qualification they were hoping to achieve, as well as the daily reality of constant change in their workplace as the redevelopment of the institution progressed. Through the sharing of stories the trainers and trainees were able to connect and find a common ground within which they were able to work together to achieve identified

outcomes. This approach is supported by Down who argues that “...*the best that teachers can do is to facilitate an active, inclusive, interesting, challenging environment...in which the learner can learn and which provides sufficient exposure to variation to cause the learner to question his/her experience, feelings and thoughts.* (2005:8).

The Certificate IV in Community Services (Disability Work) qualification requires that the learner demonstrate in depth knowledge and skills in routine workplace tasks, as well as the ability to deal with workplace complexities and to take responsibility for others. Critical to the attainment of competency at a Certificate IV level is the ability to transfer skills and to develop and implement contingency plans (Australian Qualifications Framework Advisory Board 2002). These requirements have posed a challenge for many of the trainees, as the opportunity to demonstrate the necessary skills have frequently not been possible in the workplace. For many of the trainees this has been complicated further by their limited educational experiences and language and literacy difficulties. The training team were faced with the challenge of developing learning and assessment tasks that fulfilled the assessments requirements, but were also accessible to the learners. They were conscientious in their awareness that the learners needed to identify with the material they were presented with, and that the assessment methodology was holistic and comprehensive. This is consistent with the requirements for national training package qualifications that “*describe the skills and knowledge needed to perform effectively in the workplace. They do not prescribe how an individual should be trained...trainers develop learning strategies- the ‘how’- depending on the learner’s needs, abilities and circumstances*”. (ANTA, 2005)

The responsiveness of the training team to learner needs led them to narrative centred learning. This methodology has been proposed as a powerful learning tool (Mott, Callaway, Zettlemyer, Lee, and Lester 1999), as learners are transported out of their current context, and situated in a place that they have designed. This was considered to be critical if the prevailing workplace learning barriers were to be overcome. For this purpose a case study learning and assessment task was developed for the RMIT trainees undertaking the program. Trainees were required to engage with a ‘real’ person, and develop a narrative around the needs of this ‘individual’. Billett (2001:88) suggests that “*learners need to be able to visualise and understand the desired outcomes of their work in order to develop goals for performance.*” By engaging the learners in the opportunity to create their own ‘ideal’, they were able to demonstrate competency in not only the required underpinning knowledge and skills, but also the transference of their knowledge into a new context. This learning and assessment strategy encouraged the learners to consider a way of working outside of their current working context. This was a significant break through as many of the learners had not been afforded the opportunity to express their own ideas and thoughts within their workplace. The task was found to successfully marry industry and assessment requirements and the learners individual needs.

Conclusion

Through the use of practitioner action research over a three year period the RMIT disability training team has been able to effectively interpret their experience of workplace learner engagement, assessment of current competency and skills and knowledge development with a large number of workers in an institutional setting. Movement through the action learning cycles of *reflection and analysis* and *responsiveness and adaptation* resulted in identification of a range of dysfunctional characteristics in the worksite which impact negatively on learning in the workplace. Though engagement with learners, the workplace and each other and with the support and guidance of the action learning set facilitator, members of the training team developed the capacity to design a functional model for learner engagement in disability workplaces to achieve successful learner outcomes. The model recognises the complexity of relationships to be negotiated and managed and is centred on the formation of functional clusters from the complex web of relationships and interactions which can impact on the workplace learning environment.

A critical learning outcome from the action learning process reported by the training team members is that successful flexible workplace training and assessment demands of the VET practitioner exceptionally high level conceptual and organisational skills. In the words of one team member summarising her experience of learner engagement in the workplace setting “...*you have to have much more structure to be flexible.*” Not all VET practitioners have the desire to challenge their traditional teaching practice through involvement in contextualised work-based learning programs, or the capacity to develop the capabilities required for effective learner engagement in workplaces (Noonan 2003).

As a result of their experience of working with learners in institutional settings with restricted opportunities for growth and development, members of the training team have developed new skills and knowledge in the application of narrative learning methodologies to workplace cultural specificities. Identification of individual learner needs and creating a picture of the “ideal” in disability service provision through learner engagement in “storytelling” was identified as a critical factor in ensuring the opportunity for knowledge transference in an institutionalised workplace setting.

Most importantly the use of a process of creative visualisation to define good practice in disability services has resulted in enhanced relationships between the training facilitator and the learner, with the learners’ “stories” becoming the context of the learning environment. As a member of the RMIT training team concluded “*if we had to pack up shop and leave tomorrow you would celebrate the outcomes...every one on these students being successful is a story worth telling.*” This has prompted the realisation that if the broad goal of workplace cultural change in disability services is to be achieved, the relationship between workplace, learner and training facilitator must be underpinned by a sense of reciprocity, a willingness to change and adapt, and a capacity to learn from the learner.

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