Working it out: Approaches to learning in the workplace at Victoria University

Shay Keating
Victoria University

Abstract

This paper presents findings from an online survey on learning in the workplace practices at Victoria University (VU). The aim of the research was to establish baseline data on the learning in the workplace activities currently required in courses at VU from Certificate I through to postgraduate course work degrees. In addition, the project was to identify areas of good practice and improve our understanding of the design and management of various models of learning in the workplace. Although this is not an exhaustive study, it provides an overview of some of the current practices across the University, the variety of ways these activities are organised and assessed and some of the challenges that teachers face in implementing these type of learning activities. The findings from this research will inform support for the implementation of a new Learning in the Workplace policy which requires all courses as they are reviewed (with some exceptions) to include a learning in the workplace component. Although this project was cross-sectoral, this paper focuses on the TAFE findings.

Introduction

Victoria University has recently implemented a new Learning in the Workplace policy which requires all courses across both the TAFE and higher education sectors to include a learning in the workplace activity. The policy aims to provide opportunities to learn in workplaces which will 'broaden the student learning experience' and 'enhance graduate outcomes and employability' (VU 2005). Learning in the workplace, according to this policy, is broadly defined as learning activities that use the workplace as a site for learning.[1] Seven models of learning in the workplace have been identified in a typology: project in a workplace, practicum/placement, apprenticeship/traineeship, co-operative education/internship, project in a learner's workplace, workplace/enterprise learning and work-based learning. This research project was designed to explore the variety of models in use at VU and examine how teaching staff at VU were supporting, structuring and monitoring students' learning during these experiences.

Literature review

VU's learning in the workplace typology covers a range of learning in the workplace activities which are currently used in TAFE and higher education. These cover both activities where students are employed and based in a workplace as well as those where students do not have the status of employee and are primarily based in the classroom. As Cullen et al comments 'Work-based learning (WBL) is not a homogenous concept but encompasses a variety of overlapping and competing paradigms, each based on theoretical premises and understandings and manifested in

---

[1] This includes what is sometimes known as work integrated learning (WIL) and work based learning (WBL) but it excludes classroom-based learning activities that aim to assist students to understand the demands of work (sometimes called work-referenced learning) and it also excludes learning in simulated workplaces.

different practices'(Cullen et al. 2002, p. 30). The pedagogic purposes and practices of various models of learning in the workplace therefore vary and there is perhaps no single model of best practice.

When workplace learning is successful it is generally considered to be beneficial for all parties (Waters 2005). However, there is considerable variability in the quality of learning in the workplace activities. Learning in the workplace does not just happen, and not all workplaces are considered to be effective learning environments. The 'effectiveness' or 'richness' of the learning in the workplace activity as a learning experience is generally considered to be due to a number of inter-related factors. Billet highlights the variability of opportunities to participate and learn afforded to people in workplaces (Billet 2004). This variability among workplaces poses challenges for the fair assessment of student achievement (Reeders 2000, p. 209).

Learning in the workplace may also pose challenges for many teaching staff. Some teachers find adapting to a new teaching role which requires different sorts of teaching and learning practices and capabilities such as the ability to develop partnerships with industry problematic (Waters 2005). According to Waters facilitating learning in the workplace 'requires the ability to plan and manage multiple learning and assessment activities while acting as a guide and mentor to learners, liaising with industry, balancing travel and classroom commitments and managing accompanying administrative tasks' (Waters 2005, p. 15).

In a study on different models of work-based university education, Martin (1997) notes that while there is no one model of successful practice, a number of guidelines could be applied to all work placements. Martin highlighted that where there was close guidance of students' experiences and continued joint support by both workplace and university supervisors students benefited in terms of their development of more specific generic skills and tended to be more satisfied with their experience (Martin 1997). Another factor that tended to lead to better quality placements was when there was a focus on the qualities and attributes which were considered desirable for the particular profession (Martin 1997).

There are a number of factors identified in the literature which support effective workplace learning covering both pedagogical and organisational aspects of learning in the workplace. Generally, there is consensus that the learning needs to intentional, that students and staff need to be properly inducted and prepared for the activity (Orrell 2004) and that students need ongoing support and guidance from both workplace staff and teaching staff throughout the activity. Reflection and de-briefing are also considered important aspects of good practice. Orrell comments that 'reflection and debriefing on the work by all parties is required to achieve these standards, as well as systematic evaluation for monitoring the quality of learning outcomes' (Orrell 2004, p. 1).

RMIT identified the following effective design and management principles for work integrated learning which they adapted from a number of sources (see paper for references):
1. Work integrated learning activity is integral to the curriculum
2. The activity is designed to accommodate the needs of different types of learner

3. Specific learning is targeted and assessed including learning how to learn and how to deal with unfamiliar problems
4. The experience is graded to include increasingly varied and novel tasks and problems
5. High quality supervision and/or mentoring is provided
6. Learning targets are both technical/professional and generic (including career exploration, key competencies and/or graduate attributes)
7. All parties are prepared for the activity and know and understand their roles
8. The experience develops learners' career plans and transition management skills
9. The activity is evaluated, involving all participants
10. The activity has high level support
11. The activity helps to build partnerships with enterprises, the industry and/or profession

(RMIT 2002, p. 6)

Methods

An online survey was sent to all unit/subject coordinators of *all* units/subjects in higher education courses and to all program managers in TAFE courses in the University. All subject/unit coordinators and program managers were required to fill out the survey even if their unit/program did not contain learning in the workplace activities. The survey was voluntary. Many respondents were responsible for coordinating multiple units and multiple programs in 2005 and were therefore asked to fill out the survey for each of their units/programs. The survey was open from October 21 through to Dec 6, 2005.

The survey consisted of 24 closed-ended questions, some of which were compulsory, and four open-ended questions. Slightly different versions of the survey were used for TAFE and higher education but both versions collected essentially the same information. In addition, a couple of questions in the survey varied depending on which model of learning in the workplace the respondent used. Respondents completed the survey online via SurveyMonkey.[2] The data was downloaded in an excel document and converted to SPSS file where the data was analysed. The open-ended responses were analysed in Excel.

The sample
A total of 593 responses were obtained which comprised:

TAFE	Higher Education
131 responses	452 responses

Aims
This research project aimed to explore whether current practices were consistent with some of the good practices identified in the literature discussed above. The survey sought to find out about:
• the variety of models in use at VU
• the duration of activities and how they were structured
• the induction, preparation, assessment and evaluation practices
• who was responsible for supervising students' learning
• methods of communicating with students
• who was provided with the learning outcomes and learning activities

---

[2] SurveyMonkey is a online self-administering online survey tool.

- the assessment methods used
- the purpose of the activity
- the strengths and challenges of various approaches.

Findings

There were 129 responses by TAFE program managers to the online survey. This represents approximately 1/3 of all TAFE programs delivered at VU. Of the 129 cases, 68 of the TAFE programs represented utilised at least one of the seven learning in the workplace models from VU's typology.

Models

The practicum/placement model was the most commonly used model in the programs surveyed which included a learning in the workplace activity. 28 out of the 63 cases from the typology used this model. The next most commonly used model was the apprenticeship/traineeship with 20 of the programs using this model. Co-operative education, workplace/enterprise learning and work-based learning models were not as well represented in the data.[3] Table 1 shows the frequency of each of the seven learning in the workplace models.

Table 1: Learning in the workplace activities in TAFE programs (Frequency)
(N= 129)

Model	Frequency
Project in a workplace	8
Practicum/placement	28
Co-operative education/internship	1
Project in a learner's workplace	6
Apprenticeship/traineeship	20
Workplace/enterprise learning	3
Work-based learning	2
No learning in the workplace activity	61
Total	129

A number of programs utilised more than one model of learning in the workplace. There were also some programs which used activities which were not included in VU's typology such as workplace simulations, e.g. the practice firm, clinical lab experience and a variety of other work-referenced activities. These models were outside the scope of the survey.

Learning in the workplace arrangements

It is difficult to generalise about the structure of the activities in the project, practicum/placement and co-operative education models as there is not one structure that predominates.[4] Even within these models there was quite a wide degree of

---

[3] At times there appeared to be some confusion regarding the terminology for various learning in the workplace models. This highlights the need to develop a shared language around these models across the University.

[4] In the project, practicum/placement and co-operative education models respondents were required to answer questions about how the workplace experience was structured and the duration of the experience. Whereas in the apprenticeship/traineeship, enterprise learning and work-based learning

variation. There were roughly the same number of responses to full-time and intermittent no set days per week and slightly less to intermittent set days per week. Similarly, the duration that students were required to spend on the activities varied widely, ranging from less than one day to over 26 weeks. The most common duration of these activities were 6-10 days followed by 4-8 weeks. The least amount of hours required by students was in a project in a learners' workplace model; students spent less than a day on the activity.

The majority of the apprenticeship/traineeship, workplace/enterprise learning and work-based learning programs required students to attend formal classes. Overall, the most common way of structuring these classes was by multiple blocks of several days, followed by intermittent (set days per week), although the difference in the number of responses to these two options was minimal.

Preparing students for learning in the workplace
All respondents were asked how they prepare students for the learning in the workplace activity or program. In most cases the respondents provided at least printed material for their students in preparation for learning in the workplace activity or program. The next most common method was through formal instruction in the course. These two responses represented over ¾ of all cases where learning in the workplace was offered. This suggests that in the majority of cases students are being prepared in some way for these activities.

Table 2: Approaches to preparing students for learning in the workplace (Frequency)
(N = 60. Multiple answers were allowed so totals are greater than respondents)

Type of preparation	Frequency
Printed materials	50
Online materials	12
Formal instruction in course	48
Formal instruction elsewhere	9
Informal preparation	21
Other	5
Total	145

Part of preparing students for their learning in the workplace experience is providing them with information on what they will be doing in the workplace and what they are expected to learn from the experience. In the large majority of cases students were provided with the planned learning outcomes and the learning activities. Staff were also given this documentation in approximately ¾ of cases. However, in slightly over half the cases, staff of the host organisation were provided with the learning outcomes and learning activities.

---

programs respondents were required to state whether the program included formal classes and how these were structured.

Table 3: Who is given copies of the learning outcomes and learning activities? (Frequency)
(N=56. Total is greater than N because multiple responses were permitted)

	Students	Staff	Host staff
Learning outcomes	52	52	38
Learning activities	54	51	37

Facilitating students' learning

Overall, slightly more respondents noted that the supervision of students' learning was a shared role between VU teaching staff and staff of the host organisation. The next most common response was solely VU teaching staff.

In 13 cases respondents said that staff of the host organisation were solely responsible for supervising students' learning. All the respondents that selected this response where using models which require students to be physically located in the workplace, so supervision by the teacher in a fairly literal sense (as they are not physically with the student) is not possible. However, these respondents did not it appear to regard other aspects of their role such as design of the learning experience, monitoring and assessment as supervision.

Table 4: Who is responsible for supervising students' learning? (Frequency)
(N = 59)

Role of supervisor	Frequency
VU teaching staff only	19
VU teaching support staff only	1
Staff of the host organisation only	13
Joint responsibility of VU teaching & support staff	1
Joint responsibility of VU teaching staff & staff of the host organisation	21
Joint responsibility of VU teaching support staff & staff of host organisation	2
Joint responsibility of VU teaching support staff and other	1
Other	1
Total	59

TAFE teachers were using multiple methods to communicate with students while they were undertaking the learning in the workplace activity or program. The most common methods of communicating with students across all TAFE programs was via the telephone, followed by visiting students in their workplace and email. Web tools were rarely used.

Assessment and evaluation

2/3 of the learning in the workplace activities and programs (45 cases) required students to complete at least one assessment task. The majority of these programs used a non-graded assessment approach such as competent/not competent or completed/not completed. There were only five cases in the TAFE responses where graded assessment was used.

Most students were provided with a description of both the assessment tasks and the assessment criteria. Slightly less staff than students were provided with a description

of the assessment tasks and the assessment criteria, although they were being given this information in almost ¾ of the cases. Most host staff were given a description of the assessment tasks but only about half were provided with the assessment criteria. This is perhaps not surprising given that many host staff in these activities were not involved in supervising students' learning or in assessing students' work.

Table 5: Who is given information on assessment tasks and criteria? (Frequency) (N=43)

Provided with:	Students	Staff	Host staff
A description of assessment tasks	37	35	30
The assessment criteria	34	31	18

Respondents were asked to provide information on who assessed students and what methods were used. A wide variety of assessment approaches were used in theses learning in the workplace activities and programs and as a result it is difficult to make generalisations across the board about the most common assessment approaches. Overall, VU staff were more often cited as the party responsible for assessing students than other parties. They were using a variety of different assessment methods but reports and attendance were marginally more commonly used than other assessment methods.

Overall, in terms of the way that students were assessed direct observation of work performance was the most common assessment method used. Students' work performance was most commonly assessed by staff of the host organisation. Table 5 details the frequency of responses to this question.

Table 5: How is the learning activity assessed and who assesses it? (Frequency) (N=34)

Method	VU staff	Staff of Host organisation	Student (self-assessment)	Other students (peer-assessment	Clients of the host organisation	Total
Direct observation of work performance	20	25	18	2	3	68
Reflective/journal/diary log	19	3	18	1	1	42
Report or other product	27	8	12	0	0	47
Presentation by student/s	18	3	13	6	0	40
Interview with student/s	19	9	4	0	0	32
Portfolio of evidence	22	6	11	1	2	42
Attendance	25	14	16	0	5	60
Total	150	68	92	10	11	331

In the majority of cases some type of feedback was being asked for from at least one of the parties involved, although, there were few cases where students, staff and host staff were being asked for feedback. The main approach to gathering feedback from all parties was through informal discussion. In just over ¾ of cases students and staff were being asked for feedback informally. However, in only 2/3 of cases host staff were being asked for informal feedback.

Overall, it was more common for students to be asked for feedback on the effectiveness of the activity than it was for VU staff or staff of the host organisation to be asked. Although, feedback was primarily obtained through informal discussion, questionnaires were also used to obtain feedback from students in just under half the cases.

Responses to the open-ended questions

This section of the paper briefly discusses the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey. Respondents were asked to reflect on the purposes, strengths and challenges of the learning in the workplace activities they provided to students. There was some diversity in the responses to the questions and some individuals raised unique issues which we do not have the space here to discuss.

Purposes

In many cases learning in the workplace is required to meet industry training package requirements. For instance, in the apprenticeship/traineeship model as one respondent noted, 'All course competencies are required to be assessed in the workplace by the training package.' In areas where learning in the workplace was not mandated, teaching staff were using these activities to provide students with opportunities to gain practical experience in a 'real' workplace setting. As one respondent noted the experience 'makes learning real for students'. Learning in the workplace activities provided students with the opportunity to practice and acquire technical skills which contributed to their employability within an industry. This point is expanded by the following respondent:

> *This section of the course is designed to improve the students' skills and timing of treatments, also to experience a true work environment and increase students' employability within the industry and also to increase their network of contacts in the industry.*

Most respondents felt there was a positive connection between learning in the workplace and students' employment outcomes. In some cases teachers noted that these experiences often led directly to students in their courses being offered a job in the workplace. In one case 'a high percentage of students are offered employment through the work placement activity.'

Other respondents highlighted the benefits of students applying knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom in a workplace context in an integrated 'real' way. For instance one respondent noted that the purpose was:

> *To operationalise or contextualise the content of the classroom based material, also to develop/develop an understanding of a work ethic in students, to see how several seemingly separate modules become an integrated set of tasks in a work setting.*

Strengths

A number of respondents highlighted aspects of the way they manage their particular learning in the workplace activity as strengths. A few respondents discussed various approaches to supporting and monitoring students' learning as examples of good practice. For example, one respondent held an open trainee workshop every Friday morning which they stated was a 'fantastic way of supporting the learning in the workplace undertaken by trainees.' Another respondent used a weekly entry log book

which was web based to monitor students which was for all industrial parties to view and monitor.

There was quite a diversity of responses to this question. Other responses related to use of particular tools or approaches such as learning contracts, peer assessment and the liaison with the corporation involved. A couple of responses also related to the duration or structure of the activity.

Challenges
Respondents highlighted a number of challenges posed by the provision of learning in the workplace. Access to appropriate placement opportunities was identified as an issue by many respondents. For instance, this respondent highlighted the difficulties running the placement model in their particular industry:

> *Recent policy changes to OH&S inspection requirements present a major challenge to the continuation of this model…A major challenge has been in finding sufficient places for the students to have a placement. Our Industry is limited in placements and there is a large demand, particularly in the IT area. Another major challenge to students finding their own placement is that a lot of them fail to complete work placement and therefore cannot complete their Advanced Diploma. This results in delays in completion and many withdrawals from Units of Study.*

The variability in the quality of workplaces as learning environments was also identified as an issue by a number of respondents. Teachers wanted to provide experiences that were 'appropriate' and 'productive and meaningful for students'. However, the variability meant according to one respondent that 'some students will get a broad and varied workplace and duties whilst others may only working on filing and photocopying the whole time.' One respondent felt that they needed the opportunity to assess each workplace before students start the experience.

In some cases respondents felt that many employers did not taking responsibility for students' learning while they were in the workplace and were often not taking the time to train and assess students properly. This was a particular issue in the apprenticeship/traineeship model. One respondent highlighted that many employers have an outdated notion of their role in the training system and need assistance to understand their responsibilities. For a number of respondents there was a need to address the standards of the training and assessment in the workplace and the trainers who support the training in the workplace.

The importance of having the support of the host company and maintaining ongoing communication with staff in the host company was highlighted by several respondents. Although, some respondents noted that they were not resourced to do this. Many respondents also commented that having more time with students would improve the learning in the workplace experiences but they acknowledged that this also had resource implications.

Conclusion
There was some evidence of good practice in the organisation and facilitation of the learning in the workplace activities in these TAFE programs. The survey findings showed that in most programs students were being prepared for the learning in the

workplace activity or program and were being provided with copies of the planned learning outcomes and learning activities. Staff were also given this documentation in most cases. However, the survey also highlighted that there are aspects of current practices which could be improved. Staff of the host organisation were much less likely to receive information on the learning outcomes and learning activities. This means that in some cases staff of the host organisation are not being provided with the information that could help them better plan and manage students' experiences in the workplace so that the learning outcomes are met in a meaningful and sustained way. In addition, a negative of most approaches represented in the survey findings is the lack of formal feedback being collected particularly from staff and host staff. When feedback is collected, it is mostly through informal discussion. This lessens the likelihood of feedback being recorded and therefore shared and used to systematically drive improvement in practices.

Bibliography

Billet, S. (2004). Workplace participatory practices: Conceptualising workplaces as learning environments. *The Journal of Workplace Learning*, 16:6, 312-24.

Cullen, J., Hadjivassiliou, Hamilton, E., Kelleher, J., Sommerlad, E. & Stern, E. (2002). *Review of current pedagogic research and practice in fields of post-compulsory education and lifelong learning: Final Report.* The Tavistock Institute.

Martin, E. (1997). *The effectiveness of different models of work-based university education*, Higher Education Division, Department of Employment, Education, Training and Youth Affairs, Canberra.

Orrell, J. (2004). 'Work-integrated learning programmes: Management and educational quality ', paper presented to Australian Universities Quality Forum.

Reeders, E. (2000). Scholarly Practice in Work-based Learning: fitting the glass slipper. *Higher Education Research & Development,* 19:2, 205-220.

RMIT (2002). *Work integrated learning paper*, RMIT, Melbourne.

Waters, M. (2005). *Pedagogy in VET: a background paper*, TAFE Development Centre, Melbourne.