

Crossing the line - teachers as learners: learners as teachers

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Abstract

This research reports the findings of an applied research project initiated by a group of teachers working as VET practitioners within Employment Preparation in TAFE NSW during 2005. The teachers decided to substantially change the way they were working by using 'personalised learning' as a vehicle for moving towards more learner centred practices. This shift involved supporting the tenets and practices of 'personalised' learning as advocated by NSW DET. The teachers found that, in a continually changing Vocational Education and Training (VET) context, they needed to undergo a mind shift if they were to remain relevant and capable of adapting quickly to learners with different expectations, interests, abilities, technological skills and educational needs. Teaching and learning changed rapidly as pedagogy focused on a learner centred agenda and teachers questioned their identities and authority in new ways. This paper conjectures that the challenge for this group of VET practitioners was to recognise that they were part of an emerging learning community within which they needed to be willing to engage as learners - not just be teachers.

Introduction

This paper is an exploration of the application of pedagogy associated with 'personalised learning' (Miliband, 2004) to the contexts of an employment preparation course delivered by a team of vocational education and training practitioners (VET practitioners) working for TAFE New South Wales during 2005.

The VET team became involved in an innovative teaching and learning process as part of an Employment Preparation Program (EPP) offered in a TAFE College in South Western Sydney. The EPP embodied giving students increased voice and choice in 'personalised learning' in the following ways: a pre enrolment service offering information and advice with career planning, more choice in curriculum offerings, peer and teacher mentoring for students, use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) tools, changing the section organisation to enhance fresh approaches to teaching and learning and building links to community organisations to develop a spirit of volunteerism.

Much of the literature talks about the benefits of 'personalised learning' for students. By 'personalised learning' the research-practitioners mean providing high quality teaching and learning opportunities that are responsive to the different ways that students achieve their best. In this paper, the research-practitioners focus on the uptake of personalised learning and the changes this had on a group of VET practitioners. The VET practitioners research took the form of course ethnography, whereby qualitative and quantitative research methodologies were used to investigate teacher responses to personalised learning. Multiple methods of data collection were used, including surveys, interviews, lesson plans, teaching notes, observation and personal journals to 'get inside' the lived reality of this group of VET practitioners

and capture the complexity and specificity of their world. This paper considers aspects of this enquiry- in particular the changing nature of the VET practitioner, first from the perspective of a literature discussion and then from the perspective of this study.

Literature Review

The literature argues that the new VET practitioner is driven by the needs of the individual or enterprise. They are adept at customising programs for enterprises or personalising learning for individuals. Mitchell et al (2005) stated that it is the capacity to adapt to changes with new ideas, attributes, technologies and ways of working that drives them rather than pre set curriculum. The raft of skills they need includes coping with complexities, being innovative, exercising professional judgment and taking responsibility for their own professional learning.

In developing workforce capability the new VET professional needs to adapt to the ever changing, context specific, cross occupational nature of work coupled with rapidly changing technologies and market demands. Chappell (2000) noted that in this highly fluid environment it is outdated to think that VET practitioners can remain experts in vocational education and posits it likely that being a 'learning expert' may be central to the emerging role. The movement from content expert to learning expert is already occurring where VET teachers have been working in enterprises (Keever & Outhwaite 2002) and importantly the shift involves a very different role in terms of focus, purpose and practice. It is not merely a substitution of one set of pedagogies for another (Chappell, 2003).

Adult literacy learning, in the best cases, has always involved learners in negotiating individual programs to suit their specific needs and certainly there have always been VET practitioners in Adult Basic Education who have been creative, flexible, and responsive to changing student needs. The personalising of services coupled with advances in technology have driven a profound change in the ABE teacher's role. Recent research by Snyder et al (2005) into the use of ICT tools in adult literacy has revealed that students need and want a broader technology curriculum that encompasses digital life skills. The traditional understandings of literacy are inadequate for the digital world and teachers need to embrace new notions of digital literacies. The shift from the individualising of programs within a pre determined course structure, to engaging students in personalising their own learning, requires a mindshift.

Whilst the development of new roles for VET professionals may appear an expansion of previous classroom based roles, some have argued that in reality there is a danger that classroom teachers' professional skills are devalued in the new VET environment. Harris et al (2005) set out the arguments for whether the changing role of VET practitioners, over more recent years, can be viewed as de-professionalising or re-professionalising the VET practitioner's role. The case for de-professionalising is centred on the shift in VET from education to a business, in which teachers move from teaching and creating curriculum to be brokers and deliverers of competence based training. The disaggregation of the role into separate functions of assessors and trainers is seen as a further diminution of the role.

The more optimistic argument is that VET roles are being reshaped or re-professionalised, opening the possibilities for learning and new professional identities

to emerge for VET practitioners. The transition to the new professional identity can be fraught with tension as the teacher's sense of worth and professional credibility is closed off and other opportunities open up (Avis quoted in Harris 2005).

Expansion of the VET practitioner role has been marked by a stronger focus on relationship building, the development of skills in workplace and career guidance, the devolution of some levels of human, physical and financial resource management to teachers and the meeting of compliance requirements. As VET practitioners continually seek ways to improve services and products, the role is diversifying. (Harris et al. 2005) Some teachers see this increased responsibility as taking them away from their passion of classroom teaching, others view it as a chance to do something different and gain new skills. Trying to resolve the tensions in their working lives is challenging people's notions of their professional identity.

There is then a debate about 'the new VET professional' and there is a need to explore this debate in applied settings. Is it the case that the new VET professional is stripped of complex professional teaching skills? Or are the new skills requirements simply differently expressed? If the VET practitioner is to have the capability to facilitate online learning, support the delivery of transferable skills, and develop multiple pedagogies for teaching across traditional boundaries then individual acceptance of the responsibility for their professional learning will be needed. Practitioners who are critically reflective upon their professional practice will provide positive exemplars of learning for both students and teachers.

Overview of Research

When writing this paper we struggled with the question 'what do we call the educators involved in this study'? Were they practitioners? Were they teachers? Were they learners? The problem is, they were all three, simultaneously. The practitioner-researchers found that one of the outcomes of the implementation of personalised learning was that the professional roles played by practitioners were unsettled. Thus, in the following discussion we make use of the term 'teacher' to encompass three roles – content expert (teacher with pedagogical expertise in literacy, numeracy and/or language, learning manager, and learner).

The practitioner-research reported in this paper provided a group of teachers with an opportunity to explore the adoption and adaptation of personalised learning in situ, as applied research. There were benefits for students, and this has been reported elsewhere (Miliband, 2004), but this is not the focus of this paper. In this paper we wanted to focus on the impact of the implementation of personalised learning on a team of teachers working within a vocational setting. because this was applied research, the contexts within which it occurred, and the people who conducted it, are detailed below.

1. **The Setting:** Macquarie Fields Campus of TAFE NSW is situated in the South Western Metropolitan region of Sydney. This area has high levels of unemployment, and people from a range of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

2. **The Educational Program:** At this campus we provide Employment Preparation Programs in the areas of Adult Basic Education (ABE) and English to Speakers of Other Languages Courses (ESOL).

3. **The Students:** The students range in age from 15 – 80 years and include: early school leavers, people with disabilities, unemployed and retrenched workers, indigenous people and those beyond traditional working age. Students attended programs for a range of reasons, these included increasing employment opportunities, to meet Centrelink obligations, and to enhance further education and training options.

4. **The Teachers.** The multidiscipline section consists of one head teacher with 5 fulltime teachers and 15 part time teachers. They had literacy, language and numeracy expertise. Teachers included both male and female and included 2 teachers from Arabic backgrounds. The Head Teacher had extensive experience in change management. Their project involvement was voluntary, with both fulltime and part-time teachers as equal participants

5. **Personalised learning:** This involves placing the needs, interests and aptitudes of students at the centre of educational activity hence enabling them to engage, connect and create high expectations in terms of their own career and educational goals.

Research Methodology

During 2005, a number of approaches were taken to the collection of data, ranging from broad-based survey, reflective journal writing and 1:1 interviews. The research was inductive and used a multi method approach to develop themes across the data sets. The following data sources inform this paper, and are referred to where quotes occur in the text.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY	PARTICIPANTS	DATE
Diary notes on Personalised Learning	Author 1 and Author 2	Feb. 2005 to Jan. 2005
'Little Day Out' Professional Development	4 full-time and 10 part-time teachers	May 2005
Survey- Responses of teachers to Personalised Learning	6 full-time and 10 part-time teachers	June 2005
Interview- Centre for Learning Innovation external evaluation Dr J. Mitchell	Author 1 and Author 2	June 2005
Student Surveys - ICT access Youth Program Review	30 students	August 2005
External evaluation interviews with Dr. J. Mitchell.	Authors 1 and 2	October 2005
Reflections on Personalised Learning 'Changing Practices'	7 teachers	November 2005

Table 1 Summary of Data Sets used in Personalised Learning.

Findings

Findings are discussed under four sub-headings that reflect relational and definitional changes that characterised the introduction of personalised learning; namely: (1) Engagement of teachers; (2) Change in relationships; (3) Change in Roles- Teachers learning to be learners; and (4) Learning comes from everywhere!

1. Engagement of teachers.

Teachers were used to working together on incremental changes, but they had not worked together on a project that demanded increased levels of collaboration, inventiveness and energy. Whilst teachers were interested in the challenge of creating something unique rather than replicate others work, the scope of the innovation was challenging.

'People's reaction varied between enthusiasm, bewilderment and annoyance at having to change what they were doing... overall the team was very flat and lacking in energy' [Diary Notes, Author 2, March 2005]

Building a sense of momentum was important and by focusing the teachers' gaze on what was working and not on what wasn't working, an emerging sense of the incremental success re-energized the teachers. Teacher 1 captured the changing levels of teacher engagement.

'we need to work more together, like a learning community; we need to use the growing expertise, enthusiasm and experience of both teachers and students' [Teacher Survey, June 2005]

At the end of the first cycle of the project it was evident some teachers wanted to increase their involvement but lacked the experience and confidence to make further shifts in their teaching practices. Teacher 2 commented, 'I'm enthusiastic but I don't know how to do different things'.

The Head Teacher stepped back, reflected on the teachers' individual strengths, watched for 'sparks of interest', provided challenges and utilized multidiscipline teams so that teachers were supported in moving outside their comfortable zones. Teacher 3 noted her professional growth with pride 'I took a risk and now feel proud'.

Some teachers became more engaged in changed practices while others were resistant. One area of resistance was the use of ICT tools, most notably the use of mobile phones. Teachers were concerned about giving out their personal numbers, not knowing how to text, how they would be reimbursed for work calls and if sms texting was a valid form of literacy. Comments included :

*'I don't feel comfortable giving my mobile number out..'
'I really struggle to read any text messages anyone sends me anyway'
'Those messages aren't proper English. I can't waste my time putting vowels back into everything'. [Diary notes, Author1, July 2005]*

As an outcome of the use of ICT tools complex issues including the right to privacy, the emergence of 'new' literacies, and financial ramifications of teachers using their own mobiles for work posed challenges for all teachers. After initial reservations some teachers were quick to adopt the 'mobile phone innovation' whilst with others resistance persisted.

2. Change in Relationships

Personalised learning involved engaging in intimate consultation through extended dialogue with students. Teachers needed to focus on listening to students' needs so they could assist them to make more informed choices about their educational pathways and career options.

In an initial in depth interview session between teacher and student the student's needs, past VET study, work history and volunteer experience were explored, gaps in training identified and curriculum options offered. Teachers' roles expanded to include guiding student's initial decision making prior to enrolment. Feedback from Student 1 reflected the impact of this process.

'I had never had the chance to talk to a teacher just about myself and what I wanted to do. I felt like an equal and that someone was finally listening to me' [Student Survey, August 2005]

Once students were enrolled some teachers initiated strategies to build the relationship. Students were encouraged to share breaks with teachers, use their mobiles for contact, and send emails to teachers outside of traditional class hours. Teacher 4 stated that these activities 'changed the dynamics of the teacher- student relationship' and 'we just became learners together.'

The program was structured so that students had curriculum choices including vocational options, core literacy/numeracy or language studies and ICT modules. Using flexible learning enabled students' choices to be accommodated. High demand ICT modules were delivered using a blended approach, with online and face to face learning. Author 1 captured the changing relationships between teachers and students.

'younger students helped older students with online tasks. Other teachers, who had the students for other sessions, became involved in the problem solving, everyone seemed to end up teaching everyone' [Interview Dr John Mitchell, Author 1, June 2005]

The deepening of relationships between students and teachers was not always a smooth, predictable or positive process. At times the students 'emotional discharge' made teachers feel uncomfortable as Teacher 5's survey response indicated.

'It's too hard trying getting them to accept responsibility for their own learning, they just nag me to tell them the answer and what to do. The usual ones are spitting their dummies out' [Teacher Survey, June 2005]

The collaborative approaches of personalised learning did not always result in positive and supportive relationships between teachers. In one team the differing levels of pedagogical expertise, and interpersonal skills resulted in unexplored tensions which caused conflict and distress for some team members.

3. Change in Roles- teachers learning to be learners

With the rapidly changing digital world, growth in the knowledge economy and changing expectations of students, teachers needed to see themselves both as VET practitioner (context experts) and VET practitioner (learner). This was a complex and contradictory process.

The teachers were pedagogical experts but they needed an expanded skill set to be able to adapt to the changing practices. They needed specific skills in VET operations, learner-centred teaching and learning practices, as well as enhanced generic personal skills. Some teachers were self directing and initiated learning to extend their professional practice. Author 1 noted that he had to ‘take responsibility for his own learning and just get on with it’.

Teachers who perceived themselves as learners responded positively to the challenge of collaborative learning. Author 1 worked jointly with students and co-created a student mentoring program. He talked of the depth of challenge and rich outcomes.

‘I had to think deeply about ways to engage learners and give them voice. They were really experts, had heaps of life experiences and were a powerful resource for my learning. I felt I unlocked some doors and found some valuable things..... [Little Day Out Reflections, Author 1, May 2005]

Within this complex process there were moments when the teacher was the expert and moments when the teacher was the learner. The students provided a rich source of knowledge which he was able to draw into his own learning. Not all teachers found the transition to seeing themselves as learners a simple and easy process. For some teachers the shift to becoming a learner was marked with anxiety, uncertainty and frustration.

If I am not a teacher with expert knowledge, then what am I? The teacher needs to be seen by the students as the expert and have the answers. Students look to teachers to know the right way. [Teacher Survey, Teacher 6, June 2005]

Some teachers experienced a crisis of confidence in their professional identity. This identity was premised on being an expert and always knowing the answers. When the situation became more fluid and they were no longer the expert but began to move towards becoming a learner, their understanding of what it meant to be a teacher became destabilized. This crisis was marked in the area of changing technologies and access to information. Increasingly, students ICT skills were more competent than teachers. The learning journey then became a joint process with learners taking different roles, depending on their expertise. It is useful then to think of the teacher/student relationship as the expert/novice and to place this on a continuum of learning. In any given context an individual’s position on the continuum, either teacher or student, will vary depending on their skills, knowledge and experience.

Expert

Novice



Diagram 1 Expert/ Novice Continuum of Learning

4. Learning comes from everywhere!

When some teachers surrendered control of the role of ‘expert’ learning was generated from multiple sources. The challenge was to manage these sources. The teacher’s role became one of learning manager. As this happened there was an increase in peer transfer of information as the learner/novice sought expertise from a range of sources in specific contexts.

At times, other teachers felt threatened and concerned ‘if we are not the experts, then who are we and what are we paid for?’ They had to reflect deeply about what they were an expert in. Placing stress on this deliberation was the possibility that some students might question the credibility of the teacher as the perception of the teacher’s traditional role was being changed.

To develop problem solving skills within an e learning context students were set a challenge their teachers came to realize was impossible to solve, or so they thought..... The reality was a number of students were able to solve the problem.

‘this year I learnt that teachers don’t know everything. I was able to solve a problem they thought couldn’t be done’ [Student Survey, August 2005]

This situation allowed a number of responses including ‘This is great...’ and ‘Come and share your learning’. For those teachers who perceived themselves in the dual role of teacher (learner) and teacher (learning manager,) ‘error’ was part of learning. The learning manager’s challenge became how to utilize this expert experience to create genuine learning experiences for everyone in the context. As learning managers became more experienced, some natural progressions occurred and some teachers found it advantageous to create learning experiences where they deliberately positioned themselves as novice/learner.

Adaptability to move between the positions at different stages of the learning process became a strategy to facilitate learning. The teacher who saw themselves as learning manager tended to thrive in this environment, but the teacher who saw themselves as an expert, and wished to defend this position in terms of power and control in the classroom, felt threatened and even diminished. The learning manager is well positioned to drive the complex interactions and decision making processes involved in learner centred education.

For example the initial interview process identified that two youth students had vast ICT expertise. The learning manager worked with IT specialists to meet students’ specific needs, the students took a self directed approach to their learning, and the IT Head prepared and validated a series of challenge tests. The students gained the Certificate 1 in 6 weeks. Teacher 7 and teacher 8 indicated they had ‘learnt heaps’ and been ‘blown away’ by the potential of this experience for future programs.

Discussion and conclusion

In summary, the practitioner-researchers came to a number of insights by the end of the Program. Their role had changed considerably as an outcome of their engagement in personalised learning. The traditional role of the teacher as a pedagogical specialist in literacy/numeracy had expanded to include new activities which involved providing a more personalised and holistic approach to students individual learning experiences. This was evidenced, for example, by the pre enrolment service, which involved teachers moving outside the traditional classroom walls to support student's decision making prior to enrolment.

As teachers adopted new ways of working their levels of engagement changed and their willingness to share professional expertise, take risks in their teaching, and generate ideas increased. There was a change in the nature and quality of relationships between teacher and students. By personalising learning teachers and students had increased opportunities to recognise the unique talents, and skills of each other. This recognition led to increased respect and expanded interaction between all parties which in turn facilitated chances for collaborative learning.

The shift from teacher (content expert) to teacher (learning manager) was evidenced by the creative ways developed to personalise learning, such as the use of blended delivery for high demand ICT modules. In this context the teacher (learning manager) constructed learning experiences, in which as stated by Author 1 'everyone seemed to end up teaching everyone'. Managing the learning in this context was a complex and sophisticated process requiring the exercising of professional judgement. There was a need for teachers to explore the ways in which this shift affected their professional identity.

The teachers' changing role involved a shift in acceptance of responsibility for their own professional learning. Teachers working within a collaborative context used in personalised learning, needed to become active and reflective learners themselves to enhance their knowledge of different pedagogies. Author 1 notes that he had to 'take responsibility for his own learning and just get on with it'. Teachers' professional learning became more integrated with their work resulting in more intense and productive professional conversations between teachers. Teacher 4, talks of the need to 'work more together so we can use the growing expertise of the learning community'. Deeper professional practice conversations contributed to the sense of an emerging learning community.

In becoming more active learners the teachers needed to be able to shift between being the expert/teacher and being the learner/novice. This shift was 'public' and untested by students. For some teachers such as Teacher 5, this shift destabilised their professional identity, 'if I am not a teacher with expert knowledge, then what am I.?' or others such as Author 1 the shift to being a learner/novice became an empowering experience in which he found the students a powerful resource for his own learning.

Perhaps of most interest to the practitioner-researchers, was the beginning of conjecture, that central to their responses to personalised learning was their willingness to grapple with individual notions of what made them 'experts' and more

specifically what made them ‘teachers’. They had to unsettle these notions to varying degrees as they went along.

Thus it is the practitioner –researchers’ tentative view that it was possible to identify an emerging set of dynamics located within the teachers’ experiences of personalised

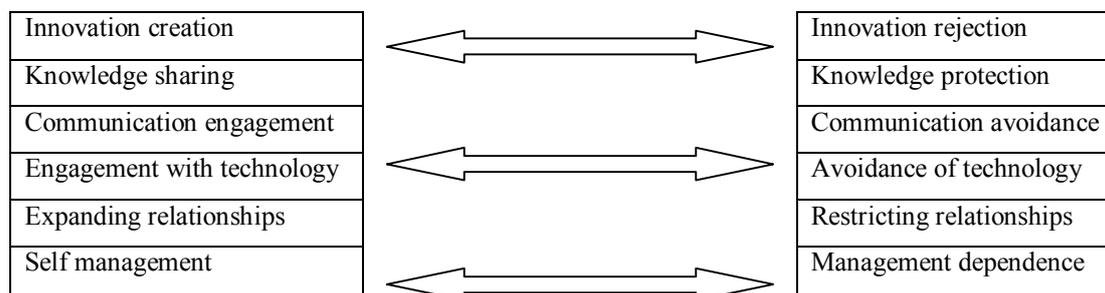


Diagram 2 Continuum of Dynamics of Teacher’s Experiences of Personalised Learning

As teachers moved towards becoming learners they were required to create and shape their own learning, seek new knowledge from a rich variety of sources, including students and work collaboratively across traditional boundaries. Being critically reflective, using research to inform teaching practice, engaging with technologies and participating in professional conversations were found to be effective learning tools for teachers.

The role of the teacher (pedagogical expert) expanded to include the personalising of services and a broad technology curriculum. Within this changed context teachers provided assessment services, career advice and planning, mentoring support, and employability skills learning options. Also noted was the emergence of the VET practitioner (learning manager) within an Employment Preparation context. The Employment Preparation learning manager’s role was changed in scope, focus and practices from that of the ABE teacher. Those who perceive of themselves as learners will be better placed to adapt to the role of the new VET professional.

Teachers will require professional development on personalised learning, the changing nature of professional identity and new notions of digital literacies, if they are to adapt to the shifting role of the teacher within Employment Preparation. Additional research from VET practitioners is needed as a way of developing further insights about the changing role of teachers within Employment Preparation. Research is also needed into ways to develop the VET practitioner’s research capability.

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