

Linking flexible VET delivery to community development in the context of an indigenous community

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Abstract:

This paper reports the findings of a collaborative project with indigenous learners engaged in VET programs in community services and youth work situated in the community of Wugularr in southeastern Arnhem Land. A customised action research methodology was used to allow participants and researchers to explore personal histories and notions of community engagement; innovative approaches to delivery and evidence collection; and specifically the integration of community project based pedagogies into workplace situated training and assessment.

The majority of participants expressed satisfaction with the quality of their VET experiences, in particular the performance of teaching staff. They however did express disappointment with the university's approach to relationship building, consistency of delivery and in particular access to student support in the past. Over the course of this project the importance of developing and nurturing relationships based on mutual benefit emerged as a central thread binding good community engagement with the ability to implement flexible approaches to VET delivery and assessment. The building of such relationships is an ongoing process that takes time.

Successfully implemented innovative and community negotiated approaches used during this project included the use of project pedagogies and digital media for the collection of assessment evidence. The success of both of these methods can be largely attributed to their use of community languages, community resources and the participant's own workplace in the learning and assessment process. Despite the documented successful engagement of learners and improvement in modular completion rate; consistency of engagement with learners during periods where lecturing staff are not physically present, and the influence of family and community

rhythms remain issues that strongly affect the capacity of community members to participate in VET programs.

Introduction:

The community of Wugularr, also known as Beswick is situated approximately 118km south east of Katherine and 31 km east of the neighbouring community of Barunga on the banks of the Waterhouse River, in Southern Arnhem Land. The community is situated in Jawoyn Country, which occupies all lands around Katherine in a roughly triangular area that extends from Mataranka in the south along the Stuart Highway in a north westerly direction to near Pine creek and in the east to Bulman. People from at least 11 different language groups call the community home. The most frequently spoken and understood language is Kriol with English as a second or third language (Schwab & Sutherland 2004).

Wugularr is a community already at significant educational disadvantage. In 2001, less than half of all Wugularr school students attained the levels of literacy and numeracy of other indigenous students in the NT (Schwab & Sutherland, 2004). Personal communication with key Wugularr community representatives at the commencement of this project revealed there is considerable community disillusionment with the VET delivery provided by CDU and other training providers in the community amongst both its indigenous and non indigenous members (Bush-Blanasi, 2008).

The provision of VET training to remote indigenous communities such as Wugularr is a key part of Charles Darwin University's (CDU) core business. The university has a strong commitment to the continued engagement and development of health and education outcomes in remote indigenous communities. Community engagement is still an area of emerging knowledge in VET education, and remains an area of key strategic focus for the university. Effective community engagement provides a mechanism to strengthen and expand partnerships between indigenous communities, educational institutions, government, industry and broader community networks (AUCEA, 2005). Further to this, good community engagement is integral in realigning the activities of regional universities with the regional priorities of the communities they service and bring these communities into the global knowledge economy (Cuttriss & Wallace, 2006)

Review of Literature:

Indigenous Australians comprise a large proportion of the total number of students studying VET in Australia. The National Report to Parliament on Indigenous Education and Training reports that in 2005 there was a record 62,765 indigenous learners engaged in VET programs Australia wide, a 10.7% increase on the 2004 figure and comprising 3.4% of all learners engaged in VET programs. Of these, a total of 17499 (27.8%) students were engaged with their VET programs in remote community settings. Whilst the largest number of indigenous VET students was recorded in NSW, by far the largest rate of growth in VET delivery to indigenous learners occurred in the Northern Territory. (DEST, 2007)

The variables surrounding the effective delivery of quality VET programs in remote communities are many and varied, presenting significant challenges to us as education professionals. Campbell (2000) asserts that this challenge is strongly linked to our tendency to respond to need within indigenous communities in a largely homogeneous manner, or in other words a 'one size fits all' solution. Campbell's assertion shows clearly something that VET educators are really just coming to understand better now; that each indigenous community is specific in its own needs and aspirations, and correspondingly its own appropriate responses to addressing these. Our dominantly non-indigenous perceptions must change if we are to work more effectively with communities; shifting to community centered models of education that emphasize community ownership, capacity building, ownership and co-operative action with educational institutions such as universities.

This process of change commences starts with understanding how we engage communities effectively. Garlick & Pryor (2002) describe the process of community engagement to be deeply rooted in the development and maintenance of trust relationships based on mutual benefit, Similarly Campbell and Christie (2008) in their study of CDU's community engagement practice identified that teaching staff who worked with indigenous communities consistently reported a need to continuously revise activities in response to a diverse range of community factors and rhythms in order to be successful.

The large number of indigenous participants in VET programs alone may seem to

confirm both the importance of VET as an educational pathway for indigenous people, and correspondingly the critical significance of getting it right if we are going to 'close the gap' in educational outcomes between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. The flip side of this is the observation that VET participation by indigenous people is largely concentrated at 'prevocational' AQF levels I and II. This shows a concerning trend pointing to a widening of the gap between the vocational skills of indigenous and non indigenous people in the workforce, and perhaps more importantly, a systemic failure to engage indigenous learners in pathways that link to higher level VET qualifications and beyond (DEST, 2007).

In a systematic review of vocational and educational training for indigenous Australians the National Centre for Vocational Educational Research (NCVER) proposed seven factors critical in the successful delivery of VET training in indigenous communities as shown below:

1. The involvement of and 'ownership' of training by local communities.
2. The incorporation of Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values into training programs.
3. The establishment of true partnerships between Indigenous communities, training providers, industry and government organisations.
4. The inclusion of flexibility in course design, content and delivery.
5. The commitment, expertise and understanding of all staff.
6. The provision of appropriate and adequate student support services.
7. The provision of funding that is ongoing and responsive to the realities of location. (Miller, 2004).

These factors comprise a network of interrelated and mutually inclusive factors. Only training that is built on all seven factors will offer the best chance of success. From these seven factors community ownership is potentially the most important forming a common binding thread between the remaining six factors. Miller also concludes that inbuilt flexibility is an essential element of all training systems and should be an organisational feature of RTO's at policy, planning and delivery levels; proposing in particular approaches that allow community negotiation and evaluation of training at all stages of the process and programs that evolve alongside community development goals.

Campbell (2000) asserts that flexible delivery has excellent potential to enhance indigenous participation provided that RTO's commit to providing training in locations that best suit indigenous learners and after full consultation with communities. Similarly, Young, Guenther and Boyle (2007) point out that flexible approaches to VET are essential to making vocational training relevant and accessible to indigenous learners. In considering VET training provided to indigenous people living in desert communities they conclude that there is a misalignment between the content and delivery models of VET and the prior skills, educational demands and aspirations of people living in these communities. In particular VET programmes need to adapt to the learning needs of community members consistent with language and cultural differences and the different ways work is constructed in communities (Young, Guenther and Boyle 2007)

In a critical dissection of flexible delivery options available to work with indigenous Australians, Woodlock (2004), presents five new practice constructs which VET teaching staff can use to shape their own practice and reposition the learner to continually build a strong sense of identity in parallel with developing skills for vocational success in non indigenous contexts. Of central importance to this paper's findings is the inclusion of 'Project Pedagogies' which view teaching and learning as an active task, retain relevance to the day to day life of the learner and stimulate active involvement in their own community. Project pedagogies hold to the underlying premise that learners and communities benefit when people are actively involved in a project that provides them with the cognitive and skill development as well as being able to make positive contributions to their community. Growth in the individual capacity of community members forms the nucleus of developing community capacity by involving in the development of new personal and service oriented networks (Balatti and Falk, 2000)

Millar (2004) asserts that VET programs have significant potential to develop communities, citing that people participating in VET programs are actively involved in their own personal development. Millar's study utilized a community development project to deliver VET programs in a marginalized community in Tasmania. Millar's study focused on a group of learners engaged in a community development project linked to the flexible delivery of Certificate II Community Services (Children's

Services) qualification. The findings of this study suggest the combination of VET and community development projects in disadvantaged communities can have very encouraging outcomes for both educational institution and community alike.

Research Method:

This study explores the use of flexible delivery and assessment strategies linked to a small asset based community development project that was constructed, driven and evaluated by community participants. Participation in this study has facilitated the formation of a small learning community consisting principally of students with current enrolment in the Sunrise Health Service's youth worker training program, being delivered in Wugularr by CDU. Participation was also opened to other interested community members and stakeholders.

In developing the project methodology Participatory Action Research (PAR) emerged as a potentially viable and inclusive alternate to conventional research techniques when working with Aboriginal communities. Conventional research methods have in some cases been detrimental to communities. This observation can be attributed to the perception by community members that research agendas are acts of colonization imposed on a community by outside agencies such as universities with no real connection to local concerns or interests. (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2000). In contrast PAR offers a flexible and robust approach to VET research that promotes ownership of both the VET delivery and the collaborative research process being used to incrementally improve it.

Three cycles of a community customised PAR framework commencing with a time of reflection from the wider community then broadening to the collaborative improvement of current practices and the development of shared approaches with current VET students was used over the lifespan of the project. Qualitative feedback from participants was then subject to thematic analysis to draw out key themes within the data.

Findings:

1) Evaluating Past Approaches:

On the whole community reflection on VET teaching and Learning was generally positive as epitomised by Cerise who's experience of VET teaching staff was that they were "*encouraging*", "*easy to talk to*", "*relaxed*" and cited of her lecturer that "*she explained the material well*". Deanna believed that feedback by CDU staff was provided in a "*useful, kind and friendly manner*", whilst David, an electrical trades apprentice liked the flexibility of his VET program stating that; "*Uni helped me a lot; get all my qualifications, paid for me to go to Darwin and the lecturers came here*".

Not all stories were positive and in particular some themes drew frank and instructive feedback from community members. One group of women in a focus group discussion concluded "*Lecturers should stay longer, and build relationships with people*" and "*come when they say they're going to*". Chester and Fred enjoyed their studies but found consistency of contact and communication to be a significant issue for them stating; "*too long, three years to do a Cert III, too long*". Similarly Conway stated, "*Uni needs to be more flexible for delivery to Aboriginal people*".

Geoff Lohmeyer, the youth outreach worker for Sunrise Health Services postulated the cause of these problems is rooted in the formation of meaningful relationships between the university and the community; "*Training staff should be prepared to spend more time building relationships, because culturally relationships are everything*".

The results suggest that there are two principal spheres in which the university needs to significantly change its delivery of VET in Wugularr. These are relationship building and providing ongoing student support to learners in remote communities. Within these themes the characteristics of concern are consistency of community contact, the provision of feedback opportunities, the provision of literacy support embedded in delivery and particularly consistency of communication with learners and other stakeholders.

2) Improving Present Approaches:

The most significant theme arising in discussion with participants during this cycle was

that visiting VET educators need to better understand the rhythms of community life without projecting their own constructs of work, time and life on participants. The construct of time in particular has a different meaning and pace to Bininj than for Balanda. It can be very easy to jump in and project Balanda expectations of time on Bininj. Highlighting this point, Anton stated that *“Balanda, they like to rush around a lot, never like to stay in the same place, this is different for Bininj”*.

Cultural, medical and social issues in communities also have a very real affect on attendance in training programs, understanding this is important. Cultural, family and social roles and responsibilities take precedence over VET training commitments, as exemplified by Chester who as the senior adult male in his family stated he was *“Too busy organising funeral, will come next time.”* This reflects the very heavy responsibility of organising funerals, ceremony and other cultural aspects of daily community life. Heavy subscription, elevated incidences of chronic health problems and long distance travel required to access allied health services also strongly influence the capacity of learners in the community to attend training:

“Late starts to training on the first day were caused by men’s health checks at the clinic. Knowing this kind of information in advance is important to community engagement and maximizing use of training time. Payday also caused problems with students preferring to go to Katherine than attend training. In some cases this was due to familial pressure to do the weekly shop, in other cases it may be motivated by urges to consume alcohol, party or catch up with relatives.” (Excerpt from Critical Reflections Journal 19th May 2008)

The geographic locale provided by Wugularr is one of the community’s great assets. Terrence shared his experience of the outdoor classroom ‘on country’. *“Working outside broke it down for us and made it more easier for us to understand and how to work out problems.”* Terrence's statement confirms that in many cases delivery of key concepts and skills such as active listening and teamwork from the community services training package need not be bound to the classroom. Outdoor environments remove community distractions, and equalise the power balance such that the VET lecturer is on the learner's turf where they can be active also in 'teaching the teacher' through cultural exchange.

The freedom to be able to use their primary vocational language, Kriol also emerged as being important to effective engagement with the learners.

“An important issue in the assessment of client (youth) interactions again is to allow participants to communicate in Kriol which allows them more fully demonstrate their interpersonal communication skills without worry or 'shame' about their competence in spoken English. Debriefing in English allows them to explain what has happened and for the group to consider how client interactions will be reported in written documentation within their workplace.” (Excerpt from Critical Reflections Journal, 23rd July 2008)

This cycle concluded with a focus group to discuss aspirations participants wanted to gain from the training and improvements that needed to be made to the training approach. All participants unanimously considered that they would prefer to do a single larger assessment community based project task covering competencies from numerous units and allowing them to practice real client based skills in their own community than lots of small assessment tasks like they had been doing so far.

All participants felt that their training needed to fit their vocational role at the Youth Centre: Anton stated that *“I want to learn different skills from other people, I want to learn more about alcohol and drugs and how to stop youth using drugs. I also want to find out more about what the youth want to do and what things they want to do to have fun.”* He also added that he wanted *“More chances to be able to practice my skills and work with young people”*.

Two participants suggested that they wanted assistance with language and literacy. In Terrence’s case this was clearly focussed on vocational literacy *“I want to learn how to be a good leader and a role model. I really want to learn how to use professional language... more computers too.”* Fred, who has very limited English literacy but a large amount of life and vocational experience in community services work as well as a completed VET qualification considered that there needed to be *“More talking and role-play and less writing... writing and reading support”*.

The vocational importance of computers and digital technology did not escape some participants. Cerise stated that she *“wants to do more study and complete the certificate,*

learn more about petrol sniffing and sport and recreation... more computers". Similarly Chester also recognised the importance of learning skills with computers; *"I want to get experience working with youth, help them learn new skills. I also want to learn more about computers, counselling and how to deal with youth problems."*

3) Developing Shared Approaches:

In contrast to the preceding cycle, the emphasis was to develop and document shared reflective insights whilst maintaining a clear focus on the participants goals to use the practice environment provided by the youth centre to improve the community's capacity to address youth issues. As their major assessment task learners were asked to plan and run a small asset based community development project based out of the Youth Centre.

At the initial stage of planning participants were asked to consider key issues affecting both young people in Wugularr and the broader community that could be addressed by their work in the youth centre. This discussion was quite emotive for Chester who related; *"the youth centre didn't work last time, now I really want it to work. I get angry and I want to keep the kids out of trouble, get them back to school, no school no pool"*. Participants felt it was essential that the youth centre worked in the community outside the centre's walls.

The group considered that the biggest issue was young people 'prowling' at night with nothing to do, which can lead to petrol sniffing, cannabis smoking, fighting and other problems. Anton called this behavior *"Hitting the street, playing midnight owl"*. Deanna considered that it was essential to provide positive diversion for youth stating that it was important to *"do something positive and keep them out of trouble"* and *"Get more people involved so it is run by youth and the community"*. Chester added that some youth centre activities could include the whole family and be active stating, *"Keep the kids active and make it family fun"*. Anton considered that young people might be disempowered in their range of choices stating that the project should *"Give them more choice, and something more to do"*.

Participants were then asked to conduct informal consultation in their community to determine who was affected and how. Chester's consultation revealed that that *"the whole community is affected"* by this issue, but in particular *"parents, elders and other family"* who feel *"shame, worry and a lack of respect"*. The group also added that store

break ins were identified in their consultation as cause of tension between some of the youth and the rest of the community.

Budgeting of the project was a shared responsibility; Chester in particular took a strong interest in this task with his newfound prowess in spreadsheet operations stating that he liked *“learning new things on the computer at the same time”*.

Cerise related the following account of the open air cinema night demonstrating both her learning and the capacity building among participants.” *We went down to the Arts Centre to set up for the movie night. We set up the PA system, movie screen, popcorn machine and the coffee machine. Every one enjoyed themselves and we raised \$102 for the youth centre from selling popcorn. We want to set up a committee to start more events and to work out how to spend the money we raised.”* Deanna stated it worked well and would be good as a *“yearly event, maybe linked in with National Youth Week”*.

At the outset of this project it was decided that community mediated documentation would be created as a means of facilitating community ownership of the project. The Wikispaces medium was chosen for this task having considerable advantages over many other Web 2.0 technologies and site development tools in that it allowed collaborative construction by participants, researchers and other stakeholders; required only modest technological literacy similar to that of using a basic word processing application; and allowed the embedding of video, audio and photographic records of learning activities and assessable items connected with the project. Community mediated documentation of this project can be found at <http://wugularr.wikispaces.com>.

Discussion

Informal and formal feedback from participants and critical teacher reflection across this project both suggest that remote area VET educators need to think creatively when using training packages, and utilise evidence collection methods developed to suit the unique needs of communities such as Wugularr. Customised approaches to delivery and assessment that allow for the recognition of community languages, and support community oriented activities represent tangible ways of improving participation and engagement with learning materials.

The linguistic reality for Youth Workers and VET trainers in Wugularr is that most spoken interactions between community members are in Kriol. Job roles entail an understanding of the emotional nuances of language to be able to provide an empathic and client centred intervention. The ability to develop flexible assessment tools that respect this cultural reality, and that are also reliable enough to collect evidence of competency is essential to the long term relevance of VET training in community services in Wugularr and other remote communities in this region. Evidence collection methods that utilise digital audio and video technology as a vehicle of documentation provide such a means. Digital technologies represent an immersive method of involving participants in the evidence gathering and assessment process. Incorporating them into class work represents a strong value addition to the teaching materials that is largely independent of its content, as evidenced by of participants who indicated that despite being enrolled in youth and community services worker training reported that they wanted to learn more about computer technologies within their studies.

In the final cycle of research extra emphasis was on shared reflection between teacher and participants consistent with longer-term relationship building processes and the implementation of a project based pedagogy. Planning meetings, informal yarning and discussions held both inside and outside teaching periods provided a rich source of feedback from participants and an opportunity for open and frank discussion with participants around the key issues facing youth in Wugularr, the role of the youth centre in addressing these issues and the planning of activities to engage young people in the community. Implementation of community project based learning approaches in this cycle was enthusiastically received from the outset by the majority of participants, and over time by other people in the wider Wugularr community. Participants felt that it was important to demonstrate their commitment to the whole community, and involve community members, which encourages and builds on the natural networking skills of participants within their own community.

The use of a project based pedagogy as the delivery vehicle for youth worker training showed definite positive potential for engaging indigenous learners in community services oriented VET programs in remote communities. In particular it was found that the conceptual frameworks of facilitating a community development approaches to youth work is best learned by 'doing' rather than 'reading', 'listening' or 'watching'.

Active participation in community projects provides an immersive and experiential way of understanding theoretical principles such as capacity building and empowerment.

This potential needs to also be matched with skilled facilitation of participant driven approaches, and importantly careful mapping of competencies and employability skills to tasks and sub-tasks within the community project's framework. Using a single community project as the sole vehicle of assessment is clearly limited in its ability to cover all competencies within a complete qualification, it does however represent an innovative method of holistic assessment that allows the application of a practice focused approach that is owned by the community and brings benefit to participants and the wider community.

Conclusions:

Customised approaches to PAR provide a useful and collaborative approach to improving VET delivery in remote settings. This is underpinned by the need for VET educators to practice effective community engagement by building effective mutually respectful relationships. This means providing customised student support, consistent contact and getting to know participants and their community as part of a long term relationship. Using classrooms on 'Country' and existing community resources maintains the culturally relevance of VET training, equalises power and builds social capital between the community and the university. In providing VET training in this context we need to be acutely aware of social, and cultural 'rhythms' of community life that may outweigh the importance of attending VET training for participants.

Community based project pedagogies are well suited to longer term VET delivery in remote community contexts and should ideally include bilingual assessment in community language especially where the vocational language of the community is the community language, and the participants ability to provide client based services in their own community is being assessed. Digital media based evidence collection is well suited to both context and task, with many younger participants possessing high levels of technological competence. Further to this the use of Web 2.0 technologies such as Wikispaces provide an easy and interactive avenue for community mediated documentation of project-based work.

Despite the success of this project documented in this paper, targeted follow-up, ongoing support especially during intervening periods of teacher absence from the community and the assessment of competency gaps is essential to ensure participants complete qualifications that will be useful to job roles within their community. Community sentiment toward education and how the university and other VET providers should tailor future approaches is perhaps best summarised by, Jungai and senior traditional elder, Jimmy Balk Balk Wesen (2008): *“Education, its good, but we don't have to change the old law. We try to teach young people the murninga (non indigenous) side and the aboriginal side. We need young people to learn the aboriginal way”*.

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