

Engaging VET Practitioners Forums

Professional judgment in teaching and learning in VET

A think piece to stimulate discussion at the Reframing the Future Forums, August 2005

Dr John Mitchell

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The case for judgment

This paper draws on recent research to make the case that practitioners need to exercise multiple judgments in order to function effectively in the complex environment of vocational education and training (VET). Practitioners need to make continual judgments about

- how to customise training
- how to meet the needs of learners with different learning styles and preferences
- how to satisfy individual learners' needs for support
- how to satisfy the needs of workplace learners and industry clients.

Judging within an ever-changing environment

Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald and McDonald (2004) found considerable consensus in Australia about the features of the environment in which VET professionals will be expected to work in the future:

an environment characterised by increasing diversity in the client base; increasing sophistication in client expectations; change in products and expansion of options for training delivery; changes in employment, work roles, team structures and places of work; increasing competition and increasing demand; and globalisation of the training market. (p.4)

Dawe and Guthrie (2004) provide an example of this future environment in discussing the new roles VET providers can play in providing training for innovative enterprises. They find that assisting innovative enterprises requires the use of different strategies by VET practitioners and the development of additional capabilities by VET providers:

...this may require working more effectively across disciplines and developing more personalised arrangements for delivery. VET providers need to identify where their strengths lie and build industry partnerships in these areas. Close collaboration with industry partners will enable VET providers to ensure the appropriate balance of practical and theoretical skills. (p.19)

Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) asked VET practitioners to identify drivers of change in the sector. Internal drivers identified by practitioners included:

- increased expectations of clients for responsiveness
- pressure for greater accountability
- rethinking approaches to teaching and learning and access to learning opportunities
- changing workloads
- student characteristics.

Note particularly the need to rethink ‘approaches to teaching and learning’: that is, the fundamentals of VET need rethinking, by practitioners, in the current environment.

Judging customisation

Innovative teaching takes account of individual learners’ differences, responding to the contemporary push for all organisations, including educational ones, to be customer-centred:

Innovative teaching fosters lifelong learning, moving VET away from the ‘content model of education’, based on a teacher-designed curriculum and to more fluid and interactive learning processes which move both student and staff members into a new and different experience of VET. (Mitchell et al. 2003, p.2)

VET industry clients and individual learners increasingly expect that products and services will fit their particular needs and that customised programs and even personalised services will become standard offerings. Mitchell et al. (2003) use fifteen case studies and vignettes to describe VET providers customising learning for the following types of learners, groups and learning styles:

- different types of individual learners including equity groups such as disability, Indigenous, ethnic, literacy and 15-19 year olds;
- different learner groups such as mature-aged workers and trainees;
- learners with different learning styles, including verbal and non-verbal.

The report also examines the need to customise teaching and learning for different settings, varying from traditional educational institutions, to simulated workplaces to a variety of enterprise workplaces.

Let’s examine the challenges of making good judgments about learning styles.

Judging learning styles and preferences

Catering for individual learners’ differences in VET is a major undertaking, given the vast range of learners and settings:

...teaching and training staff need to move beyond their own habitual or acquired personal and professional learning styles to satisfy the diversity of student cohorts. These can range from 15-19 year olds, to Indigenous students, to mature-aged students, to busy professionals with limited time, to parents returning to study after raising a family. (Mitchell et al. 2003, p.32)

While the ideal may be to satisfy individual learners’ needs in VET, there are many different ways to interpret the differences between learners. For example, Burns (2000, pp. 43-78) suggests that four different schema can be used to analyse students’ individual differences:

- theories related to the study of personality traits and the effects of personality on behaviour, for example theories about introverts and extroverts
- theories related to values and preferences, for example a student used to teacher-dominant classroom settings may resist self-directed learning opportunities
- theories related to styles of thinking, for example Sternberg’s theories about legislative, executive and judicial styles of thinking

- theories about the effect of memories on goal achievement.

To cater for individual learners' differences, Mitchell et al. (2003) note the popularity among Australian VET practitioners of

- the Learning Style Inventory developed by Kolb, with its categories of accommodating, diverging, assimilating and converging,
- the Learning Styles Questionnaire of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, with its categories of activist, theorist, pragmatist and reflector.

Smith (2005) finds that VET teachers typically develop their own theories of learning style – largely seen as preferences – either without reference to established theory, or on a basis of a theory they were aware of and that had appeal to them (p.8). Smith suggests that further investigation in VET would be useful in establishing the effectiveness of teacher-generated pragmatic notions of learning style and forms of response to learning enhancement or learner experience (p.6).

Smith and Dalton (2005) recommend that professional development for VET practitioners should include an examination of learning style theories, but ultimately should be focused on good practice:

Professional development in the area of style is likely best contextualised into good practice by teachers rather than placed in a context of learning styles theory. Notwithstanding that, there is value in a theoretical understanding where the opportunity for observation of students is more limited, and to provide the teacher with the ideas to more systematically observe and respond to style. (p.2)

Despite the popular promotion of self-directed learning in VET, Smith (2000) shows that it is not suitable for all learners, including in the workplace. Apprentices are thought to generally prefer learning in structured environments that provide opportunity for direct social interaction with their fellow learners and with their instructors. These learners may exhibit lower preferences for learning through verbal means such as reading or listening. The strong preference of apprentices, as non-verbal learners, is for learning through hands-on experience, demonstrations and practice.

Judging individual learners' needs

Practitioners need to make multiple judgments about forms of support for learners. Misko (2000) identifies the following forms of support and guidance, believing them to be essential to the success of student participation in any form of learning:

- the need for supportive instructional activities;
- clear instructional materials;
- opportunities to discuss problems or issues with teachers and peers;
- availability of teacher support;
- timely feedback;
- practical examples;
- and enough time and willingness to practise skills and meet requirements.

Moynagh and Worsley (2003) suggest that, due to teacher shortages, future learning environments for post-16 learning will be tailored for individuals and small groups and could include

- virtual reality
- intuitive modes of thought

- larger learner-teacher ratios
- more teacher assistants
- self-directed learning
- collaborative learning online
- new forms of continuous on-line assessment
- automated record keeping
- peer-led group work.

In these many different environments, tailoring learning will require refined judgments.

There is an increasing focus in VET on meeting the needs of online learners. Educational issues surrounding online learning such as quality, instructional design and teacher support systems are analysed by Harper, Hedberg, Bennet and Lockyer (2000), Brennan, McFadden and Law (2001) and Cashion and Palmieri (2002). This research indicates that learners participating in online courses will increasingly require considerable support and guidance from training providers supplying the online products and services.

Brennan et al. (2001) believe that a number of preconditions are necessary if the goal of improved learning outcomes for students in an online environment is to be achieved. The preconditions include:

- taking into account differences in student backgrounds in every phase of the design and delivery of online materials and support
- catering for the differences in learning styles and preferences of students
- focusing on the communicative and interactive dimensions of the new environments
- not expecting technology to solve all the hard problems.

Brennan et al. (2001) suggest that teachers and trainers can be prepared to use new technologies flexibly and beyond minimum levels of competence and that teachers can focus on explicitly enhancing information literacy skills in students.

Judging the needs of workplace learners

In addition to the debates and issues raised by learning styles, VET practitioners are being challenged by the use of the workplace as a common learning environment and the different ways learning can occur in the workplace. Tynjala, Valimaa and Sarja (2003) note that learning in workplaces is different from learning in educational institutions. It is often as follows:

- group-based, not individual
- practical not mental
- involves contextual reasoning more than symbol manipulation
- is situation-specific and not focused on generalised skills and principles.

Wood (2004) finds that fully on-the-job training is viewed by learners and registered training organisations as a good way to learn as it provides flexibility for all concerned and financial incentives to employers. With appropriate support for learners, benefits of this type of training include learning that is customised, and learning that encompasses real work experiences and is relevant to the individual and the enterprise.

However, suggested areas for changes to on-the-job training include improving the following:

- the level of networking among students
- the levels of time management skills of learners

- the balance between work and study requirements
- the level of theory training
- and the way trainees are valued in the workplace. (Wood 2004)

As VET providers pursue the goal of providing customised learning services for each enterprise, practitioners are becoming more aware of the specific preferences of individual learners within enterprises for services and support. Mitchell et al. (2003) find that learners want services and support that lead to better outcomes and have the following characteristics:

Ensuring relevance. VET clients and customers increasingly want knowledge and skills that are marketable or relevant, either for organisations and their staffing demands, or for individuals to secure greater employability and choice in paid or unpaid work and lifestyle.

Ensuring personal service. VET clients also want skills to meet the growing demands for customising and personalising services.

Providing 'just for me' training. Increasingly, VET clients and customers want to develop these skills at times, in ways and at locations that suit them, not the VET provider.

Supporting 'learning in context'. Industry and enterprise clients want training designed in ways that suit their settings and needs.

Supporting performance support systems. With the use of technology and the speed of change, often formal training is deemed too slow or expensive. Semi-structured and informal workplace learning can and does fill much of this void. For example, large companies can design online systems to support the learning and performance when required, by providing step-by-step online help or support or redesigning the task to make formal training and learning redundant. (Mitchell et al. 2003, pp.30-31)

Svensson (2003) suggests that learning environments in enterprises increasingly will be a responsibility of line managers, who will also provide individual workers/learners with access to mentors. The most important factors for learning environments are as follows:

- work and the organisation of work
- an open culture for sharing information and knowledge through mentoring
- collaboration in teams and projects
- and networks that are face-to-face or conducted through ICT.

Stephenson (2001) examines a holistic approach to workbased learning, based on the concepts of individual and corporate capability. He argues that capable individuals, and the organisations within which they work, have a mutual interest in continuous development within changing environments which can best be served by a shared commitment to autonomous learning (p.86). However, Stephenson finds that the ideal of a holistic approach to workbased learning presents many difficulties:

The implications of giving learners greater responsibility for their learning through work, and providing the necessary support for them to do it well, require teachers, line managers and external agencies to adjust the way they operate and the services they offer. (p.100)

Judging the needs of industry clients

Why and how enterprises use the nationally recognised type of training is examined by Smith, Pickersgill, Smith and Rushbrook (2005). They find that an enterprise's decision to engage in recognised training is not made lightly and decisions are made afresh each time a new training need arises. Successfully embedding training in enterprises involves a three-phase process - engagement, extension and integration. In most cases, it is dependent on positive initial

engagement; extension of training through a 'VET evangelist' who 'sells' the benefits of recognised training and persuades management; and, integration of competency standards associated with recognised training into many human resource processes.

Boud (2003) suggests that educators at the interface of education and work must look to the practices of work, and not attempt to force industry-based learners into a conventional educational view of the world (see also Harris, Simons and Moore 2005). But what educators do at the interface between educational institutions and workplaces will change substantially and there are and will be even more changes in practices in work involving new kinds of training practitioners.

An appreciation of different work experiences will have an impact on VET pedagogy, argues Griffiths (2003), who identifies different models of work experience:

- the traditional model of work experience involves launching students into the world of work
- the generic model provides an opportunity for key skill assessment
- the work process model involves assisting students in attuning to the context of work
- and the connective model involves seeing work experience as a form of reflexive learning.

Given these different models of work experience, Griffiths (2003) suggests that increasingly the connective model of pedagogy and learning in workbased contexts should be developed. Businesses, educational and vocational institutions should respond by using and developing the connective model of learning through work experience by connecting formal and informal contexts of learning. These institutions can also provide mediation between formal and informal contexts of learning to achieve an effective relationship between institutional learning and workplace learning developed in a partnership between teachers and workplace trainers.

Summary of professional judgments

In summary, VET practitioners need to make numerous judgments about teaching and learning, including:

- how to customise and personalise training
- how to analyse an individuals' learning styles and preferences
- how to understand – as a teacher/trainer – one's own approach to learning styles
- how to support different learner groups such as learners in the online learning environment
- how to provide learning in many different ways in workplaces, especially when the training only occurs on-the-job and often in an informal manner
- how to develop partnerships between external teachers and enterprise based managers and trainers, to address the needs of both the employer and the employee.

This brief paper demonstrates that the environment in which VET practitioners operate is becoming increasingly complex, requiring finer and more subtle judgments by practitioners, in a multitude of ways.

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