

“What is applied learning?”: Exploring understandings of applied learning amongst beginning teachers.

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Abstract

Deakin University, Geelong initiated a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) in 2005. At the end of this year we interviewed selected students in order to gather data on their experience of the new course. The concept of Applied Learning is often not well theorised and one result of this is that gaining consensus about what this might mean is often difficult. The students we interviewed came from quite diverse backgrounds and workplace experiences but nevertheless had similar views about what this concept means in practice and were able to clearly articulate examples of Applied Learning in a range of settings. This paper examines their insights in the light of some theoretical perspectives on Applied Learning and also discusses some of the difficulties experienced by these students when they try to apply new ways of teaching and learning in school settings.

Introduction

This paper uses data gathered as part of a three year Australian Research Council Linkage Project with the Smart Geelong Local Learning and Employment Network (LLEN) as an industry partner. The research team includes Jill Blackmore, Jennifer Angwin, Annelies Kamp and Geoff Shacklock who are also presenting papers in this symposium. This project has mapped new strategies of educational reform and community capacity building in understanding and managing ‘risk’ for 15-19 year-olds through a case study of the Geelong LLEN.

The LLENs are a statewide response to a need identified in the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways in Victoria, Australia (Kirby 2000) for enhanced collaborative local networks focused on the needs of young people. These networks seek to identify gaps in education, training and transitions for young people. At the same time, they foster cross-sectoral collaboration between education and training providers, industry and other support agencies in planning the delivery of programs that will improve educational and employment outcomes for young people within the local (regional) area.

As we have pointed out elsewhere:

LLENs play a strategic role in mapping gaps in provision of services and participation opportunities for 15-24 year-olds in educational settings and in the management of effective transitions to employment and further education and training. The focus is clearly on establishing and supporting networks for community capacity building in meeting diverse transitional needs of young people (Harrison & Shacklock, 2007).

Another paper in this symposium (see Kamp, 2006) outlines the genesis and rationale for the introduction of the Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) at Deakin University and the community consultation role the LLEN played in supporting and fostering its initiation. This new qualification was one response to the challenges presented by the introduction of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL)¹ seen as an alternative post-compulsory pathway for students largely unsuited to the narrow 'academic' orientation of the Victorian Certificate of Education (taken in years 11 & 12). It was envisaged that entrants into the GDAL, drawn from a range of trade and other experiences, would be able to draw on their professional knowledge and skills in teaching VCAL once they were able to gain teacher registration. The idea was that these students' industry experience would give them the credibility 'to challenge the entrenched practices of other teachers' (Kamp in this symposium). The course structure includes blocks of on-campus teaching, combined with substantial periods of teaching experience in a range of settings, including schools and non-government education providers.

Methods

Towards the end of the first year of the GDAL students were invited to talk to us about their work and personal histories, their experiences of the course and their industry placements. We also asked them to talk about what Applied Learning meant to them. Interviews were taped and transcribed. We interviewed three women and three men at length. Our intention was to interview more but the end of the university year and our own marking workloads got in the way. These interviews formed part of our ongoing research for the Linkage project with the LLEN as industry partner, as well as providing us with evaluative information on the course itself.

What is Applied Learning?

The concept of applied learning is often equated to 'hands on' or practical learning experiences. However, since the 1990's (sic) when increased attention was given to the links between education, training and the 'world of work' a broader definition of applied learning has emerged. This broader definition advocates an approach which contextualised learning in a way which empowers and motivates students, while assisting them to develop

key skills and knowledge required for employment, further education and active participation in their communities (VQA, 2004, p. 1).

The focus in the Victorian Qualifications Authority (VQA) VCAL Information Sheet (2004) is on 'student centred' learning, integrating theory and practice and moving students towards more adult and independent learning. They list eight key applied learning principles that are worth noting here, as they will be returned to later:

1. Start where learners are at
2. Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
3. Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
4. Connect with communities and real life experiences.
5. Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
6. Integrate learning – the whole task and the whole person. In life we use a range of skills and knowledge. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks.
7. Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Everyone learns differently. Accept that different learning styles require different learning/teaching methods. But value experiential, practical and 'hands on' ways of learning
8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best 'fits' the learning content and context (2004, p. 1).

Current understanding of the term 'applied learning' varies from state to state in Australia and more broadly from country to country. This concept, although not always referred to as applied learning probably has its genesis in the focus on 'child centred' learning that can be traced back to the 19th Century. As one example, Chung & Walsh have written about the history of meanings associated with this concept in Early Childhood Education. They maintain that in the American context Friedrich Froebel first used the term child centred in relation to the new kindergarten movement (2000, p. 216). They point out that even at its genesis there was a struggle over its meaning which was dependent on which ideological sub-group you belonged to. As a result, and using Kliebard (1995), they maintain that the term contains many 'currents'. This contestation over meanings is still present in curriculum innovations today, with successive iterations containing continuities and threads from the past (see for example Collins, 2000).

In the context of my work as a pre-service teacher educator John Dewey and later, Jerome Bruner and their particular focus on child centred learning are more familiar. Dewey is widely understood to be the founder of the progressive education movement with its focus on experiential and child-centred learning and related topics evident, for example, in *My Pedagogical Creed* (1897); a text still used in our undergraduate Education Studies Major units today. In this 'declaration' Dewey outlines his philosophy on schools, part of which I have reproduced below:

I believe that the school is primarily a social institution. Education being a social process, the school is simply that form of community life in which all those agencies are concentrated that will be most effective in bringing the child to share in the inherited resources of the race, and to use his own powers for social ends.

I believe that education, therefore, is a process of living and not a preparation for future living.

I believe that the school must represent present life-life as real and vital to the child as that which he carries on in the home, in the neighborhood, or on the playground.

I believe that education which does not occur through forms of life, or that are worth living for their own sake, is always a poor substitute for the genuine reality and tends to cramp and to deaden.

I believe that as such simplified social life, the school life should grow gradually out of the home life; that it should take up and continue the activities with which the child is already familiar at home (1897, Article 11 – What the School Is).

The focus here is on real-life experiences, on school as a social and socialising institution and on building from the child's experiences in order to make education meaningful. What differs from modern versions of progressive education inherent in the VCAL and understandings of Applied Learning (exemplified in the beginning quote) and their emphasis on work related skills is the notion of education for its own sake rather than for 'a preparation for future living'.

Similarly Bruner, in *The Process of Education* writes that:

Motives for learning must be kept from going passive...they must be based as much as possible upon the arousal of interest in what there is being learned, and they must be kept broad and diverse in expression (1960. p. 80).

Bruner saw children as 'active problem solvers who are ready to explore difficult subjects' (Smith, 2002). For Bruner 'Knowing is a process not a product' (1966, p. 72). In an essay on Dewey, Bruner, while acknowledging that 'One writes against the backdrop of one's day' (1962, p. 115), is somewhat critical of Dewey's optimism and reads his creed against significant world changes (p. 123). Nonetheless his assertion that;

Telling children and then testing them on what they have been told inevitably has the effect of producing bench-bound learners whose motivation for learning is likely to be extrinsic to the task – pleasing the

teacher, getting into college, artificially maintaining self-esteem (1962, p. 123),

is entirely sympathetic with Dewey's child centred philosophy. In his more contemporary writing his focus shifts from the psychological to an acknowledgment of the influence of culture on educational processes as '...culture shapes mind...it provides us with the toolkit by which we construct not only our worlds but our very conceptions of our selves and our powers' (1996, x).

In the Victorian educational context many of Dewey and Bruner's ideas are evident in the move to progressive education in the 1960s and 1970s. Cherry Collins maps some of the territory in her paper on outcomes based education. She states that at this time:

...there was a strong reaction in debates about schooling to the standard view that laying out bodies-of-knowledge² through standard textbooks and teacher talk in front of this great variety of youngsters was a fair and just way to do things. Did it provide equality of opportunity? Did it provide opportunity at all for some? ...Syllabuses had been written with middle-class, Anglo-Celtic, male students in mind and had therefore treated the background cultural experience of this student minority as the 'normal', prototype experience which a syllabus could assume as a starting point for learning (2000, p. 16).

This rather potted history of child-centred progressive education is necessarily truncated. However, it is not hard to trace some of the ideas represented by Collins back to Dewey, or to move forward and see evidence of them in current debates about the VCE and concerns about equity and school retention. That one current form of progressive education, VCAL, sits alongside 'bodies-of-knowledge' curricula such as the VCE and IB and is firmly focussed on work related skills, points to the social and cultural influences on curriculum development and the highly politicised and always contested nature of such. This contestation often plays itself out in the perennial theory versus practice debates that are by now a familiar part of the educational landscape.

Students' Understandings of Applied Learning

How does this new version of applied learning play itself out in schools where teachers embody contested views about curriculum, students and how they learn/should learn? As mentioned earlier we interviewed the new Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) students at the end of their first year of study³ and asked them about what applied learning meant to them and about what their experiences in schools were as beginning teachers with a specific orientation to applied learning. Student placements were in a variety of educational settings; some were in schools and some were in Adult and Community Education (ACE) settings and with other NGO providers. Because of the richness of the data I have decided to reproduce lengthy excerpts here and as far as possible let these students tell their own stories. The paper then ends with my attempt to

pull the various threads together and to comment, albeit speculatively, on some of the issues raised here.

Maddie, started off at General Motors as only one of three girls accepted for an apprenticeship as a motor mechanic and then went on to be a trainer. For her, applied learning is 'something that is relevant'. She can remember:

...sitting through maths classes thinking "Why do we have to do this? I'll never have to multiply x and y. What is it?" Then when I've been at work, I've come across some of the stuff I've learnt and I think, "Why didn't they tell me that I'll need that for working out how to balance something, or how to calculate? Why didn't they just say, an example of this...?" Make it real, make it relevant (interview 28/10/05).

Meghan was a journalist for twenty-five years, then went freelance to accommodate family commitments and more recently has worked on employability skills in a non-government organization that trains young people for the automotive industry. She rehearses similar themes to Maddie but gives a concrete example from her experience working with young people who have left school and are considered at risk on a number of levels. For her applied learning is:

It's engaging learning, I think. Applied Learning to me is making the learning that needs to be learned apply to the young person's life and to their interests, so that it becomes learning they want [to do] and they see the purpose of. I can use an example from my work where I train the young people in employability. The young people that we get are young people like Maddie⁴, who just loved hands on learning, so every week I have to drag them up from the workshop that they love, to sit in a room similar to this and talk about how to get into a career and they just dumb right down and they get the blank looks on their faces, so it's a real challenge and I've had to learn how to engage them.

Trying to engage disengaged young people presents particular challenges for teachers in general, and particularly beginning teachers. Here Meghan describes how she was able to draw on applied learning principles to get her message across.

I've used a lot of principles that we've been studying this year, I've changed my approach to job training because of what I've learnt from here. Maddie's actually sat through a couple of my job transitions with me and as an example, we talk about the barriers to employment and they all can name them because they've experienced all the knock backs and I run the class now as much more of a co-operative, it's not a lecture, we share the knowledge that we have, it's a shared wisdom. They've all had experiences of being knocked back and they know full well why they were, so my husband helped me. He made these wooden blocks and I get them to write in

chalk on some of those barriers between them and employment and we build a wall, and we put somebody in the role of employer and then we build this wall around the employer and it becomes this insurmountable barrier between us and that job that he's got, and it can be things like chewing gum, having your hat on backwards, smelling like a cigarette, swearing, no eye contact, a limp handshake, and we make this big wall and then we talk about how to break that wall down. So, I might take the brick off that's marked chewing gum, 'so what do we do about that'? "Well, you just don't do it, you put it in the bin before you go in", 'oh, ok', so we've got rid of that block and I throw it on the floor and gradually they help to dismantle this wall and realise that there's nothing now between them and that employer, because they've learned how to talk the talk and walk the walk that the employer wants. And that's been really, really good, but what's even more satisfying is, when they get jobs and 70% of them do, I go and interview them and take their photo after they've been there for three months and I ask them, "What is the thing that really helped you"? They always say "job train", and that's so satisfying because I know they didn't want to be there, but it was one thing to learn the skills that they needed but it was another to get that chance at that apprenticeship and they realise that what they did in job train changed the way they thought about how to get a job (interview 28/10/05).

Experiences of Applied Learning in School settings

Students' experiences of teaching in a variety of in and out of school settings ranged from positive to quite negative. Schools are still the main VCAL providers and it is for this reason that the data below focus on students' experiences of applied learning in school settings.

The good

Meghan describes her positive experiences in a secondary school in a deprived area where students exhibited particularly challenging behaviours.

I thought, I knew School A kids from my other work experience, so I knew they've rocked up to us and they were tough and they were hard edged and they had chaos in their lives, so I knew what I was going to, but I fully expected the teaching staff there to be people, a bit like the ones you were describing Maddie⁴, who were washed up and didn't want to be there and kind of drew the short straw. On the contrary, almost everyone who's there is there because they want to be there, because they absolutely love these kids with a passion and I've seen teaching practices there that wouldn't be tolerated anywhere else, but they work. For example, the language in the classes, I mean I'm used to bad language, but the use of the 'f' word and 'c' word, any word is tolerated and it took me about ten

minutes to ask the teacher, lovely young, beautifully spoken middle class young man, I said to him, "What's with the language?" and he said, "This is their language, this is how they speak, they're not being rude, this is what they talk like at home, we tolerate it, we don't like it and occasionally we will call them up if it gets too graphic, but we tolerate it because we understand we need to keep engaged and if we start forcing them to behave in a middle class way (he didn't say middle class, but that sort of way), we're going to lose them, they're going to feel like they've got nothing in common with us.

The VCAL principles cited earlier (VQA, 2004) encourage teachers to start where learners are at and to connect with student's experiences. When our sensibilities are confronted in challenging ways how do we keep our eye on the prize and move on in ways that work within the context and its limits?

After a while I got the kids to translate for me and if they stood up from their seat and screamed out the 'f' word, I said, "Ok, what does that mean?" "Ok Miss, it means, please sir can you come and help me." So I've come away from School A with a huge admiration for that school, they do amazing things. And, the kids will never bring anything back from home, because home's chaos. Now, that's generalising, there are some great kids who've got wonderfully supportive parents, but by far the majority of kids, in that one class that I was in the last term one boy, his brother had just been done for arson, so that was the big topic of conversation in the classroom. I took them to Melbourne on an excursion, they'd never been to Melbourne, these were 15 and 16 year old kids had never been to Melbourne, they were terrified, instead of going wild, which I fully expected, they became cowering, dependent little people who just stuck close to me, they had never been on a tram or a train, that was just fantastic for them, that was life changing stuff for them, we were given a map and anyway, it was a great experience, School A and I'm there again this term (Meghan, Interview 28/10/05).

The bad

Maddie recounts some of her experiences at School B, where she did her first placement:

Out at School B we've got the workshop there, fantastic workshop but there's more things to be done, but they've got a workshop. The guys are doing a really good program. It's themed VCAL where they work on...like all their subjects relate towards the same particular thing. They build a car to go up to the Maryborough RACV 24 hour race, so they're in engineering, they're engineering the frame of this car in the auto part, they're using a motorbike engine to power it and in maths and English they're reading the maps and calculating how much petrol it's going to take to get there and what's the best way, the map reading. So it's all got a purpose...

This school appears to be well placed to provide the ideal type of VCAL experience. They are offering a themed VCAL, which focuses on the ‘integrated learning’ principal (VQA, 2004); they appear well resourced and are appealing to the students’ interests. But it takes more than these things to make a valuable learning experience:

... and yet they manage to just completely wreck it. They’ve got this right idea of a fantastic program, they’ve got three sessions of automotive a week and they have these handbooks. I’ve got one here. It’s one of the unit guides out of the competencies, these unit guides, we’ve got to workshop them. Got this program and he says, “It’s theory today, work through that”, and these kids are looking at these pictures and they’re saying, “But, what are these things?” and we’ve got a workshop. Why aren’t we out there, why can’t we say, “Look today, we’re going to be working on fuel pumps, this is what I want you to be able to do at the end of this, we want to go through and we want to identify these components, have a look at that, bring it with you. Ok, let’s go out there and let’s pull it apart, let’s touch and feel and get that relevance”. Why, when you’ve got a workshop would you give...that’s applied learning to me, it has to be relevant, it has to. Put this in front of them, the screens come down, they go blank. I find that they sort of give them big tasks and then it’s like, well, of course they’re going to mess up. You can’t give them a car and say, go for it, you need to break it down into steps and I think part of it is you need to think about it, you need to plan it, you need to be prepared. It’s so easy to just give them that, give them this or give them a motor bike engine and say, “Pull this to pieces” and then say, “You’re not supposed to take that off it, why did you take that off first?” (Maddie, Interview 28/10/05).

Ben was a Biologist in a previous life and worked with young people in a range of community and science based projects while overseas. He continued this work when he returned to Australia. For a range of reasons he decided to change vocations and applied for a position as a program coordinator with a non-government education provider. He works with young people who are early school leavers but who still want to pursue their education and is completing the GDAL part-time while still working.

Ben’s experience of VCAL in schools was less than positive and during his interview he contrasted this experience with his experience in his own work setting outside the institutional and organisational constraints of the school, where small numbers of students are taught with a high teacher to student ratio.

While Maddie made it clear that ‘productive pedagogy’ is an important element in providing meaningful educational experiences, even when excellent resources are provided, what happens when these are lacking?

I had a placement at School C, which I didn’t enjoy because the VCAL program there, without pointing fingers, is in a bit of a mess I would say,

well in a lot of a mess, I would think. I think it's completely under resourced, the kids are completely unmotivated, they're lost. I think they would have had maybe twenty-five students across both year levels and the feedback that I got and I could quote it, is "I don't know what I'm doing here, I'm doing stuff that...". It was a form of baby-sitting. Just seeing both sides, you come here and you see - we've got some very high risk and high needs kids and they're happy and they're engaged most of the time, I'm not saying it's all roses, but the work that we get out of these guys is tenfold what School C get and the expectations of what they have out there. Those schools are not the most nice environments anyway, but they're stuck in the old art room out the back. I wouldn't question the teacher's desire to do well, it's just they're paddling up stream and the stream's flowing pretty hard at the moment.

This sort of environment makes it very difficult to provide a quality program that motivates students even when teachers are committed and doing their best.

He was good, he's only a young guy, he was willing to give feedback where he could and he was very supportive and he was very enthusiastic towards me, no problems there, but he was just overwhelmed by the whole VCAL experience, I think. I think that was his second year, so I think initially he'd done industry and enterprise, which is a VCE subject, but they were doing that for the VCAL kids and then he'd gone into this year, Personal Development and he was also running Industry and Enterprise and I think Personal Development could fall apart, like that. He had no experience I think. He'd just been given the kids and said, 'go and organise something for them to do', so he was really grappling with finding something...(Ben, Interview, 22/11/05).

...And the just plain ugly?

Although with a lot of hard work Maddie was able to make her experience at School B a positive one, there were still some incidents with her supervising teacher that obviously still concerned her at the time of interview:

I'm talking about some of them that have been teaching for maybe twenty, twenty-five years and I don't think they're prepared to change. You're forever hearing things like, 'they're only industry skills kids, they're only VCAL, you can't expect any more of them', but if you don't expect any more of them you won't get anything from them. The method of teaching, you've got these VCAL kids and one of the first things I saw was probably the roughest nut of the whole lot, one day in class he put his hand up and the teacher said, "Is this going to be another one of your stupid, meaningless questions?", and he literally went, "Oh, I won't bother", and he sat there for the rest of the class and looked at the floor. It's like, here is a young man who's done the right thing, he's gone by your rules and you've made

him feel bad, like that was ringing alarm bells, I suppose (Maddie, Interview 28/10/05).

What Does All of This Tell Us?

Earlier I sketched out some possible antecedents of the concept of applied learning through a brief examination of child centred approaches to teaching and learning. These views appear to be enduring in the sense that they can be tracked over time and become prominent in particular historical moments, albeit in ways that respond to changes in culture, economic circumstances and prevailing views of what it means to be a young person in a particular historical epoch.

The enduring qualities of these views about young people and how they [some of them at least] should be educated is evident in the GDAL students' definitions of applied learning. Much like Bruner, and Dewey before him, they emphasise relevance, quality time, engagement, hands on learning, making explicit links between theory and practice, and implicitly, respect, both for these students as human beings and as people who 'know'. These qualities are not unlike those offered by the VQA when outlining their eight principles of applied learning in the VCAL.

The principles outlined by the VQA (2004) which were listed at the beginning of this paper make 'sense' in terms of widely understood ideas about good pedagogy and responsive curriculum. For those of us who also travel into 'bodies of knowledge' territory these qualities are not dissimilar to those we would espouse as good teaching practices, no matter what course of study or setting. However, such lists assume that everyone is starting on the same page in terms of experience, ideology, teaching philosophy, and adequate resourcing and collegial support. It is clear from our data that this is not the case and that some schools have a long way to go in order to achieve these principles.

The definition of applied learning offered by Meghan and her interactions with students at risk in an NGO setting is at odds with the story told by Maddie about her experiences at a local high school. Unfortunately Maddie's experience is all too familiar to us in our ongoing work with schools. Having said this however, our experience is that these stories, although extremely worrying, are still in the minority. Stories like Maddie's sit alongside inspirational tales about teachers who are dedicated, above and beyond the call of duty, to ensuring that students from disadvantaged backgrounds get something useful out of their educational experiences.

One of the issues these stories raise is that it takes special qualities to work with these kids. They are hard work; often challenging and frankly sometimes quite dangerous to be with. The schools that respond best to these students are those that are able to come together over a common goal – to make these kids lives better - and to equip them with skills to face the serious hurdles ahead for them. They can't be teachers that are tired, waiting for retirement, intolerant, expect students to be 'told' and then shut up, endure

disrespect, or be treated as docile and empty vessels to be filled up by teachers' knowledge. As Jerome Bruner has said:

Education is not simply a technical business of well-managed information processing, nor even simply a matter of applying 'learning theories' to the classroom or using the results of subject-centered 'achievement testing'. It is a complex pursuit of fitting a culture to the needs of its members and of fitting its members and their ways of knowing to the needs of the culture (1996, p. 43).

Applied Learning could be seen as a response to this 'complex pursuit'. However, even those that are willing and do have students' best interests at heart, like the embattled teacher in Ben's narrative, need support if Applied Learning is to fulfil its potential.

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¹ The VCAL was accredited by the Victorian Quality Authority (VQA) in 2002 for an initial period of three years. Students select accredited modules and units for the following four compulsory strands:

- * Literacy and Numeracy Skills
- * Industry Specific Skills
- * Work Related Skills
- * Personal Development Skills

² Collins points out that this approach to curriculum is used in the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), the International Baccalaureate (IB) and most senior secondary academic curricula. ‘In this approach, the curriculum designer envisages the task, as introducing students to some of the important ways of understanding the work in their culture’ (p.13). This can be characterised as a top-down approach that focuses on discipline knowledge. Collins uses a sink or swim metaphor for describing how students’ success is measured in this approach.

³ Students in this new course can undertake 1 year of full-time studies or 2 years part-time.

⁴ Meghan is referring to her GDAL colleague Maddie who she worked with on one of her placements in a NGO.