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Sustaining Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) educators
Christine Schulz, Deakin University, christine.schulz@deakin.edu.au

Abstract
This paper draws on emerging data from in-progress analysis of interviews with 22 teachers/educators who teach the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) in the settings of schools, Adult Community Education (ACE) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE). The development and implementation of VCAL occurred in 2002 as a response to Victorian government policy initiatives resulting from the Kirby (2000) Report. The VCAL is offered alongside the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), in years 11 and 12 of school, as another pathway into employment or further education and training. VCAL is also offered in the settings of TAFE and ACE. The VCAL curriculum uses applied learning as a pedagogical foundation to engage students in relevant, meaningful and authentic learning. In schools VCAL is delivered by qualified and registered teachers. In the TAFE and ACE sectors VCAL is taught by staff who are not necessarily teacher trained. Many pre-service teaching courses (including Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment) do not include applied learning pedagogy in the curriculum. Since VCAL’s implementation there have been calls for greater consultation with, and support given to, VCAL teachers and organisations (Knipe, Ling, Bottrell and Keamy, 2003, p. 6; Harrison, 2006). Additionally VCAL teachers are frequently ill prepared professionally to manage a cohort which includes a high concentration of disengaged young people demonstrating challenging behaviours and attitudes (Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, p.1). Emerging data from the interviews with VCAL educators indicates these issues have not been addressed and many educators and teachers continue to feel unprepared and poorly supported. This is particularly significant in the light of a recent Victorian government announcement that, despite rising VCAL enrolments, VCAL coordination funding to schools is to be cut in 2012. (VALA, 2011, para. 4). To compensate for a lack of structured support and preparation, VCAL educators are frequently sustaining professional practice by their own agency in adapting already held life-skills and knowledge.

Key Words
Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning, Educators, Applied Learning
Preamble
This paper draws on data exploring the professional experiences of 22 educators who teach the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). The paper identifies several issues that are important to the sustenance of the VCAL program and the educators who work within it.

The VCAL is based on applied learning pedagogy. Understandings of applied learning vary between sectors and contexts (Harrison, 2006; Shacklock, 2006; VCAA, 2006). Subsequently the paper begins by clarifying the meaning of ‘Applied Learning’ as used in this discussion about the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) and VCAL educators. An overview of the introduction of VCAL into Victoria follows before a brief explanation of the importance of ongoing professional sustenance of VCAL programs and educators. This is followed by discussion of aspects of teaching in VCAL, characteristics of the VCAL cohort and the professional experiences of VCAL educators. Five themes from the data are discussed: preparation to teach VCAL, what educators bring to VCAL, experiences that drain VCAL educators, experiences that sustain VCAL educators and why VCAL educators think that VCAL succeeds.

It should be noted that identifying a term that could be used across the settings of schools, Adult Community Education (ACE) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) where VCAL is taught, to describe those who ‘teach’ VCAL was problematic. VCAL is taught by a range of qualified staff including trained teachers, professionals and holders of Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment. For ease of discussion in this paper, the term ‘educator’ is used to refer to all teachers, trainers and professionals who ‘teach’ VCAL.

Defining Applied Learning in VCAL

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) determined eight principles of applied learning to guide the development of content within the VCAL curriculum. In this paper the meaning of applied learning is used in accordance with the principles of applied learning laid down by the VCAA as follows:

- Start where learners are at.
- Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
- Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
- Connect with communities and real life experiences.
- Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
- 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.
- 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.
- Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context (VCAA, 2006, p. 1)

The VCAL is offered alongside the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), in years 11 and 12 of school, as another pathway into employment or further education and training. VCAL is also offered in the settings of TAFE and ACE. VCAL Curriculum is designed using the principles of applied learning to bring the VCAL educator and VCAL student together in a learning partnership in which learning is aligned with ‘real life’ opportunities, partners and projects. Subsequently students develop skills, knowledge and attributes aimed at contributing to ‘work readiness’. An example of
a project that could be incorporated into VCAL curriculum and undertaken by VCAL students is the building of a ‘chook shed’ for a local community garden. The project process incorporates the development and use of skills from the Australian Core Skills Framework such as teamwork, problem solving, initiative, technology, planning, organising and cooperation (VCAA, 2007, p. 12; DEEWR, 2011). These are examples of skills that “assist young people to develop and transfer knowledge and skills within and between varieties of contexts” and are valued by employers (VCAA, 2007, p. 14). Additionally the project promotes and develops the students’ use of literacy, oracy and numeracy, in an ‘applied’ manner as they create building plans, work in collaboration with each other and liaise with a community organisation.

The introduction of VCAL into Victoria

Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) in Victoria underwent policy review and restructure as a result of the Kirby Report (Kirby, 2000). Among the recommendations of the review was that the “focus of provision must be on the needs of young people” and a call for a collaborative, networked approach to the implementation and ongoing support of PCET (Kirby, 2000, p. 8). Within Victoria there have been several initiatives targeted at the ‘at risk’ category of young people aged 15-24. During 2001 and 2002 the government created 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to assist in the school to work transition. Research had shown that young people who left school early were more likely to not make a school to work transition (Blake, 2009; Henry, Dalton, Wilde, Walsh & Wilde, 2003). Along with a strengthening of relationships between education providers and industry workplaces as a result of the establishment of LLENs, additional pathways and qualifications have been provided for young people undertaking years 11 and 12 of school. The programs provide young people with ‘hands on’ alternatives and/or supplements to the traditional class room delivery of VCE. These pathways either sit alongside the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) or have the flexibility to be integrated into it. Among the additional pathways and qualifications (such as School Based New Apprenticeships (SBNA) and Industry specific Vocational Education and Training (VET)) is the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL).

The VCAL is described as:

- a hands–on option for years 11 and 12 students. Like the VCE, the VCAL is a recognised senior qualification. Unlike the VCE, which is widely used by students as a pathway to university, the VCAL focuses on ‘hands on learning’. Students who do the VCAL are more likely to be interested in going on to training at TAFE, doing an apprenticeship, or getting a job after completing Year 12 (VCAA, 2008, para. 1-2)

The VCAL has three qualification levels – Foundation, Intermediate and Senior (VCAA, 2008a). In preparing assessment tasks Foundation Level has “high levels of teacher support and assistance”; Intermediate Level has “some teacher support and assistance but with the expectation that students will demonstrate independent learning”; and Senior Level “provide[s] opportunities for students to work as independent learners with teacher support and assistance available on request” (VCAA, 2005, p. 4). This structure is compatible with the “start where learners are at” principle of applied learning (VCAA, 2006, p. 1). The VCAL is also a flexible pathway, “[s]tudents who start their VCAL and then decide they would like to complete their VCE, are able to transfer between certificates. Any VCE studies successfully completed as part of the VCAL program will count towards the VCE” (VCAA, 2008, para 4).

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1 ‘At risk’ of leaving school early and not transitioning into further education, training or employment
The VCAL was trialled in 2002 “at twenty-two sites across Victoria” and introduced widely into schools, ACE and TAFE in 2003 (Henry, Dalton, Wilde, Walsh & Wilde, 2003, p. 2). In the final report of the Evaluation of VCAL trial there was a clear indication that if the “distinctive nature” of the program, was “to be sustained, then professional development of all teachers, trainers, school administrators and central DE&T personnel involved with the VCAL initiative must become a top priority” (Henry et al., 2003, p. 18). This does not appear to have occurred despite the continued increase in both provider numbers and enrolments. In 2010 there were “429 providers” of VCAL and “19,175 certificate enrolments” (VCAA, 2011, p. 6).

The VCAL was originally accredited by the VQA (Victorian Qualifications Authority) for a period of three years. During 2004 a review process took place prior to reaccreditation by the VCAA. No mention of the needs of the educators is identifiable among the review questions (VCAA, 2004, p.16). In 2005 however, an Appraisal of Standards for Registration of VCAL Providers and for Quality Assurance of VCAL Programs was undertaken for VQA. The report data was drawn from selected school, ACE and TAFE VCAL providers and outlined 31 recommendations. Recommendation 9 stated:

That consideration be given to inclusion of the following seven resource areas crucial to VCAL delivery in the standards for registration:

a. Appropriate human resources for teaching VCAL;
b. Flexible teaching spaces to support adult learning principles;
c. Access to diverse teaching materials, including: computers in classrooms; stationery and art/craft supplies; multi-media and audio visual equipment; library material; course specific curriculum materials and modules;
d. Industry-specific resources, teaching materials and access to suitable work placements;
e. Logistical and funding resources, including access to transport, planning time etc;
f. Professional learning and support;
g. Out-of-school and community-based resources

(Walsh, Beeson, Blake & Milne, 2005, p. 8)

Among the seven resource areas is mention of “[a]ppropriate human resources...” and also “professional learning and support” (Walsh et al. 2005, p. 8). It is not made clear what these terms represent. After reading recommendation 5 however, it could be inferred that “[a]ppropriate human resources” are an adequate number of qualified educators who have the following attributes:

- Flexibility with students and program delivery;
- Good knowledge and experience of applied learning;
- Appropriate experience in and knowledge of industry and workplaces;
- Ability to relate to students who have become disengaged from formal learning;
- Excellent knowledge of VCAL and how it can be used to meet students’ individual learning needs’
- Broad life and cultural experiences

(Walsh et al. 2005, p. 7)

In 2003 Knipe, Ling, Bottrell and Keamy (2003, p. 6) expressed concern that in the implementation of VCAL there was no apparent “consultation with those involved in either implementing the change or in being beneficiaries of the change”. The VQA Project undertaken in 2005 highlights that support for the VCAL educators and the VCAL program was a key ingredient for a successful program and continued to be of concern. The next year Harrison (2006. p. 12) identified that educators “need support if Applied Learning is to fulfil its potential”. Additionally Pritchard and Anderson (2006) called for research of the implementation of VCAL in ACE and TAFE. They highlighted that educators in those settings do not necessarily have the skills to deal with young people for whom mainstream education in schools has not been successful.
Many of the young people entering VCAL programs in TAFE have had prior negative experiences of schooling and have also often been disengaged from formal education and training for some time. Conversely, most TAFE teachers have had little, if any prior experience of working with this new student cohort. To date, however, there has been little research into the impact and implications of VCAL implementation at TAFE institutes and their staff (Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, p.1).

This omission sits in a wider view that changes in education frequently result in “educators now feel[ing] that these changes are often outside their control, and their views are rarely sought and little appreciated” (Welch, 2007, p. 2). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) consider that educators’ knowledge has been an under used resource, as do Groundwater Smith, Brennan, McFadden and Mitchel (2001). My research (and the data later discussed in this paper) draws on VCAL educators’ professional experience and views of their learning to address an identified gap of a lack of impartial critical research into VCAL and the experiences of VCAL educators.

**VCAL educators need ongoing sustenance**

My introduction to the concept of ‘applied learning’ (as defined by the VCAA, 2006) occurred in 2008 on joining the teaching team for the Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) (GDE(AL)) at Deakin University.

This course was developed in response to the changes now underway in education programs that provide young people between the ages of 14 and 19 years with the knowledge, skills and values for a range of further study and employment pathways. These changes include the introduction of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS); the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL); VET in schools; and other Enterprise Education and Applied Learning programs in the lower and middle secondary school years (Deakin University, 2011, para. 2).

The GDE(AL) is currently one of the few available courses that provide pre-service teachers with exposure to the theory of applied learning pedagogy that is the foundation for VCAL. Additionally GDE(AL) course curriculum draws on the VCAA principles of applied learning in the delivery of its own content. Thus it models and teaches applied learning. Pre-service teachers learn by ‘doing’ – both in their teaching placements and by assignments that have been designed to support the development of real (useable) teaching resources. Many assignments also require the pre-service teachers make contact, and work in collaboration with, professional colleagues from industry and education settings.

A number of years previously I had worked within the ADF and was familiar with the Army Training System (ATS). Initially it appeared there were strong connections between applied learning as defined by the VCAA and the competency based skills training used in the framework of the ATS. Applied learning pedagogy however, has a learning focus on more than ‘doing’. I came to realise there were more differences than connections; for example, army training did not “[s]tart where the learners are at” (VCAA, 2006, p. 1). Training started at a pre-determined entry standard. The curriculum was not negotiated and while training built “resilience, confidence and self worth” (VCAA, 2006, p. 1), the primary emphasis was on developing and consolidating the attributes as soldierly qualities to support organisational cultures and core business. Benefit to the individual was of secondary concern.

However connections remained. Initial military training provides defence members with basic instinctive behavioural responses to predictable scenarios and commands by means of repetitious, rigorous instruction and practice. Basic army skills and employment courses cannot prepare personnel for every unpredictable eventuality they will face in their workplaces as each military unit
has a unique designated role. Consequently specialist ‘in-house’ skills and knowledge training takes place later within workplaces. When new equipment or ways of doing things are introduced into service, prior systematic training and support is provided to personnel who need to have that particular knowledge. Subsequently basic military training only begins to prepare military members for their eventual workplaces.

Similarly Kirby (2009) makes the comment about teacher education that “[t]eacher education programs can only begin to prepare teachers for the demands of their role, and the expectation that much of what needs to be learnt will occur on the job reflects the complexity of the craft” (Kirby, 2009, p.4-5 citing Odell, 1990 p.14; Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p. 1026; Martinez, 2004). Subsequently it would appear reasonable to expect ongoing support for both education providers and educators be available, especially in regard to relatively recently introduced programs such as VCAL. Knipe et al. (2003, p. 6) have indicated this is not the case and have called for greater support. Others are concerned about the lack of support given to organisations and educators as VCAL has a concentration of young people, especially in TAFE, who “have had prior negative experiences of schooling” (Pritchard and Anderson, 2006, p.1).

This paper draws on in-progress analysis of data from interviews conducted with 22 VCAL educators who work in school and out of school settings. The data supports previous findings that VCAL educators work with a high concentration of disengaged young people who display challenging behaviours and also that educators and organisations continue to struggle with VCAL delivery and require ongoing support. This is concerning. Applied Learning pedagogy “consider[s] the whole person” and “[p]romote[s] diversity of learning styles and methods” (VCAA, 2006, p.1) allowing educators to increase the likelihood of engaging the young people in education and facilitating their transition into further education, training and the workplace. Subsequently providing support for VCAL programs and educators invests in the future of the young people and their ability to contribute to Australia as economic citizens².

Despite no apparent response to a previous call by Knipe et al. (2003) for greater support to organisations offering VCAL, in August 2011 the Victorian government announced that it intended to cut funding to organisations for VCAL coordination. In response the Victorian Applied Learning Association³ (VALA) released a statement that included the following:

Due to the success of VCAL there has been a steady growth in the number of students enrolled in it. In 2003 there were 5,137 students enrolled in VCAL at 239 providers (VCAA, 2004). By 2010 there were 19,175 students enrolled in VCAL at 429 providers (VCAA, 2011). Despite the number of VCAL providers having plateaued (as stated in the memo of 18 August to schools), the number of students enrolled in VCAL continues to rise – the 2010 figures being 8.3% higher than in 2009 (VALA, 2011, para. 4).

The rise in the number of students undertaking a VCAL program suggests the success of alternate pathways and opportunities for young people who would otherwise struggle with the academic pathway of VCE or disengage from school and not successfully transition into employment. Also highlighted in the VALA statement (and by the example provided of VCAL students building a ‘chook house’ in a community garden) is that VCAL coordination is frequently complex and

² A term used before the development of VCAL. For example see Educating Australia: Government, Economy and Citizen since 1960 by Simon Marginson (1997). Field (2006 p. 103) has since used the term ‘economic nomads’ to describe workers who have ‘multiple career paths’. Bourdieu (1986) uses the term economic capital but stresses the relationship (dependant on the field of use) with social and cultural capital.

³ VALA is a professional organisation providing support and networking opportunities to applied learning educators who work in a range of settings and sectors.
requires extra student support systems, cross subject area planning and organisation, as well as the establishment and maintenance of community and work related links. All this requires coordination above and beyond normal teaching and assessment processes (VALA, 2011, para. 2).

The VALA statement reinforced research which indicates that the “resource hungry’ VCAL had created” an “increased workload” for program coordinators “over and above their normal teaching loads” (Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, p.8). Additionally the statement indicates that the number of VCAL providers who have not previously been involved in the organising and delivering VCAL curriculum is increasing. This means that novice providers and novice VCAL educators may miss out on organisational support and professional development in both setting up and sustaining VCAL programs.

Teaching in VCAL

VCAL is delivered in settings such as Secondary schools, Adult Community Education providers (ACE) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers. While the educators who work in schools are qualified and registered teachers, those who work in ACE and TAFE might be qualified and registered teachers and/or hold a Certificate 4 in Workplace Training and Assessment.

It is argued that VCAL (including the VCAL cohort) has characteristics not all VCAL educators may be professionally prepared for, or able to respond to. Despite a changing world “schooling itself has changed so little” and most secondary learning remains regimented and teacher focused (Groundwater-Smith et al. 2009 p.17). One of the characteristics of VCAL is the focus on ‘applied learning’ where the student is at the centre of the learning experience. Applied Learning “contextualises 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” (VCAA, 2006, p. 1). Blake (2009, p. 46) has argued that the “strategic introduction of the VCAL’s applied learning methodology alongside the VCE has presented significant cultural and pedagogical challenges to the dominant academic paradigm that has existed within most secondary schools since the 1950s.”

Many young people undertake VCAL because they are unable to cope with the more academic curriculum of VCE. Another important characteristic of the VCAL cohort is the predominance of young people with challenging behaviours, or who are regarded as ‘at risk’ of not successfully transitioning from school into further education, training or employment (Henry, et al., 2003, Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, Harrison, 2006, Blake, 2009). The teaching strategies used in VCAL are able to engage a diverse range of learning styles (Henry, et al., 2003).

Unfortunately negative perceptions about VCAL exist. Pritchard and Anderson (2009, p. 7) reported the following feedback from a Youth Pathways Program worker at a large Outer Metropolitan TAFE “[m]any teachers continued to be resistant towards the presence of ‘youth at risk’, and ‘labelled’ the VCAL as a program for ‘school drop-outs’. At times providers might display little regard for VCAL. Blake (2009) indicates that “the vocational and applied learning programs in schools – such as VET in Schools and the VCAL – are currently given the lowest status in terms of the secondary school curriculum hierarchy” (Blake, 2009, p. 50 citing Teese, 2000, Boston, 1998, Henry et al., 2003).

The professional experiences of VCAL educators

As previously indicated there are a number of commissioned reports that focus on the implementation of the VCAL program (Walsh et al. (2005) and Henry et al. (2003)). In contrast there is little impartial critical research available regarding the learning experiences of VCAL educators.
My purpose, or perhaps challenge, in collecting data from VCAL educators was similar to that of Kvale and Brinkmann (cited by Tanggaard, 2009, p. 1498) being “to understand themes of the daily world from the subject’s own perspective”. Later, another of my challenges will be to “make sense of learning from experience” (Boud, Cohen and Walker, 1993, p.1). In this paper only the first of the two challenges is explored – to identify themes and perspectives in the professional world of the VCAL educators that have become evident from in-progress analysis of research data.

The interviews with 22 VCAL educators who worked in schools, out of schools, ACE and TAFE settings were semi structured by open ended questions. The questions ranged from enquiry about educators’ previous professional experiences, opportunities regarding applied learning professional development and satisfaction to challenges in teaching in VCAL. The interviews were an average duration of one hour. As open questions were used it was no surprise the conversations were not linear. Conversations became strangely shaped circles as educators responded in varying ways. Follow up questions frequently resulted in conversational tangents. Sometimes we found ourselves happily discussing issues many thoughts away from the original questions. When I found a quote in an article by Brody, Witherell, Donald and Lundblad (1991, p. 257) that resonated with my perception of the interviews as circular stories I sourced the original article.

Stories go in circles. They don’t go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. If you’re lost, you really start to look around and to listen (Metzger, 1979, p. 104).

By taking Metzger’s advice and listening I have identified, for the purposes of this paper, a selection of themes that highlight some of the challenges VCAL educators face along with attributes and experiences that support and enhance their professional practice. Those themes are:

- Preparation to teach VCAL
- What educators bring to VCAL
- Experiences that drain VCAL educators
- Experiences that sustain VCAL educators
- Why VCAL educators think VCAL succeeds

Clandinin and Connelly (2000, p. 18) believe “[f]or us, narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience”. Squire, Andres and Tamboukou (2008 p. 1) have said often research is framed “in terms of narrative because we believe that by doing so we are able to see different and sometimes contradictory layers of meaning, to bring them into useful dialogue with each other, and to understand more about individual and social change”. Brief narrative extracts from the interviews are provided here as examples of range of individual experiences and opinions VCAL educators have within those five categories.

**Preparation to teach VCAL**

The teaching experience of the interviewed VCAL educators ranged from two – 20 plus years. While some had completed teacher training which included applied learning in curriculum content, most had not. Some ‘fell into’ VCAL, some chose VCAL and others were teaching it unwillingly and frustrated by how it had been introduced into schools:

...If I had a choice – I wouldn’t do [teach] it. I certainly believe in the philosophy. I don’t think introduction into schools has been well done. I don’t think its acceptance in schools –
and I know that takes time – but even now five years on we are still battling to get a lot of that acceptance...

When asked how prepared she was to teach VCAL an educator replied:

…Yes – well I wasn’t very well prepared at all. You have to be very flexible so that you can go where the students are interested. I’d just like to know how to teach applied learning basically…. 

Another educator when asked about useful preparation for teaching VCAL replied:

…It is difficult because you have each year a different lot of kids and there are different problems, things arise so there are so many skills you need, because the kids that arrive here are high risk sort of kids so there is drug problems, there is home problems, there is motivational issues, there is .. you know we could keep going on and on … I guess we really need to know about counselling, I mean the amount of hats you gotta wear, you need to be aware of how to deal with anger management issues….alcohol abuse, there is risk of suicide… and each year is different …...this year we have had a pretty good year really…. 

The issue of duty of care to students was highlighted as applying to any sector but believed to be exacerbated in a setting with a high concentration of young people with challenging behaviours or from unstable family background:

…the biggest problem with any sector at the moment is probably that of public duty of care issues, so when you are actually dealing with kids that have got numerous issues and you have limited training then you have to be very careful that you don’t tread on or overstep your training and then deal with issues that you shouldn’t be dealing with… so that is a huge issue and I guess another issue is that we have to document everything that we deal with and that is just impossible…. 

A VCAL Coordinator indicated:

…..no one is prepared - they [the teachers] have four years of degree program to teach in a secondary school – which doesn’t cover VCAL and they are put into VCAL and there is nothing – and I am doing my best to try and support these teachers with limited stuff myself…

A number of educators bemoaned their lack of specialist preparation for teaching VCAL:

…..there was no preparation [for teaching VCAL] during my teacher education training, I reckon I have learnt best as I have been doing it …..nothing I learnt at uni has anything to do with the real world…

However this comment possibly summed up the general feeling quite well:

…..there is no preparation for VCAL teachers and I think that is a real shame…

What educators bring to VCAL

In a number of interviews it became apparent the attributes, skills and knowledge some VCAL educators already possessed doubled as resources they drew on in their professional practice. Interestingly VCAL educators who indicated they themselves were early school leavers or identified
with the students in their classes subsequently felt they had a large number of resources in their professional ‘tool kit’ they could use:

…I left school at year 10 and I guess that sort of taught me how these kids think a lot – because I didn’t cope very well with school, I was more into sports and so I guess being a creative thinker I am able to find different ways to meet their needs. Most of the kids here drop out of school so their needs are very much like myself and they don’t like sitting in a classroom too much and I don’t like sitting in the classroom, so I think I am able to find creative ways to meet [their needs]…

One educator identified that among her own developed skills, those of:

…budgeting, using public transport, time management, being flexible and adaptable…

linked very neatly to the Employability Skills Framework (VCAA, 2007, p. 12) and subsequently were able to be drawn on in devising projects and activities in the VCAL strands of Numeracy and Work Related Skills.

While another VCAL coordinator said:

…I have had experience as a welfare coordinator and have always been interested in students who have not been able to achieve fully in a school, I have also a qualification in special education and have worked with integration kids….

Interestingly the same coordinator indicated that when new VCAL teaching staff were needed:

…I hand pick my VCAL teachers – as the Coordinator I get a little bit of leeway with that and they are teachers that you feel are sympathetic to the cause and work well with students that don’t like sitting in their seats and writing copious notes and they are teachers that are a bit more user friendly with students who learn in a different way – so I try hand pick the teachers that are interested in this area, but as far as PD there is virtually not a lot around, it is a real indictment on the system…

It appears that as a mechanism of coping with the lack of preparation, support and ongoing professional development VCAL educators look deeply into their own professional ‘tool-boxes’. I clarified an emerging suspicion in one interview by ‘asking’ ‘…you are making it work only because of your background and who you are, not so much what you have been given to prepare you by the Department…..?’ The participant had no hesitation in confirming my clarification. In other interviews I heard:

…I took it on knowing that I would have to prepare myself...

or

…I drew on my own learning strategies...

I formed the view that VCAL educators rely on adapting knowledge they already have and responsive ‘on-the-job learning’ to both prepare and sustain them for teaching in VCAL. The educators’ requirement for adequate preparation, ongoing professional learning and support appears to have become obscured by the ‘bandaid’ mechanisms they draw on. The consequence is the need for preparatory learning and ongoing support may have become invisible.

Experiences that drain VCAL educators
As previously indicated - there is little literature available that provides critical analysis of the VCAL program and the experiences of VCAL educators. Additionally, calls for support for VCAL programs and educators do not appear to have been answered. For me, the urgency of addressing these two issues was confirmed during a brief ‘passing’ conversation with ‘X’ who had been working as a VCAL educator in an out of school setting when I interviewed him. He was no longer teaching VCAL as he had got burnt out and could no longer sustain the physical and mental levels the job required. During our interview his response to the question “how does dealing with young people who had very complex lives impact on you and your practice?” had been:

...Yeah it impacts on... well not only practice but...I have a lot of trouble actually separating my work and home lives. It is really difficult to leave what you are dealing with [at work] at the door and not worry or think about it when you get home. That is one of the things that I really struggle with in this job...

A relatively new teacher related her struggle with devising curriculum and strategies to keep her students engaged:

...I know when things are not working - but a problem in the last couple of months is where I haven’t felt like I am even heading in the right direction. I have tried so many different things and I said to the VCAL coordinator “I don’t know what else I can do to engage some of these kids”. The VCAL coordinator teaches year 11 VCAL and he says “always leave your ego at the door” (sighs)...  

However it is not just classroom experiences that drain the educators, the effect of administration and compliance demands were also highlighted by different educators:

...I actually think that one of us could be fully non teaching just to do all the admin side of it – it would be great because my curriculum is so far down on my list of what I am doing with my kids because I am focusing on the QA I’ve got in two weeks and then there is all the other things – you have to enrol them [the students] on everything and you have to find the subjects you are allowed to enrol them in first...

and

...it is the lack of recognition and it is a labour intensive program to manage...

As previously indicated VALA (2011, para. 2) has indicated that curtailing Government funding support to the VCAL program may affect the success of program delivery. Funding is intended to support the ability of educators and coordinators to complete administration as well as liaise with partnership organisations such as employers, VET providers and community groups involved in delivery of the VCAL program.

Experiences that sustain VCAL educators

It appears that VCAL educators are not necessarily predominately sustained by professional development or support from the provider. To date three other mechanisms have been identified that appear significant contributors to sustaining VCAL educators, they are: the personal, the social and success.

The personal as sustenance is supported by comments such as:

... like I said I am really passionate about this...
and

...[teaching VCAL gives me] enormous satisfaction wouldn’t do it if it wasn’t. I am doing something that I believe in. It has got to be a passion for me and I believe that I am helping to empower young people to move on with their lives. I know that sounds very high fullootin’...but if I wasn’t doing that, what would be the point?...

The social as sustenance is supported by comments such as:

...I have got some really good colleagues and really good experts in the area – I draw on them. I draw on teachers in this school......

and

...we couldn’t survive if we didn’t have a supportive collegial environment...

and

...and I think that in some ways that is why VCAL works so well is that we are a good supporting group........

Success as sustenance is supported by comments such as:

...well one of the girls in particular will go for the traineeship that I went for and she probably wouldn’t have – she didn’t have the confidence and administrative skills that she does now and she has taken a real step up...

and

...you know everyone of those kids either went on and succeeded in year 12 or got a job immediately. There wasn’t one that wasn’t successful. It was an incredible experience. It was probably one of the best teaching experiences that I have ever had...

The benefit of funding as sustenance however wasn’t totally ignored. In at least one school, Government funding for VCAL allows for the option of a Contract Relief Teacher (CRT) to be employed to ease the teaching load of the VCAL coordinator. Subsequently the coordinator was able to explore, develop and maintain organisational networking relationships so necessary for the project based VCAL program.

...our school is very supportive of VCAL and always has been which has made it a lot easier and I get [a lot of] periods for coordinating which no other school has but enables me to organise a pretty good program because I have got the time to do that – I have got the time to follow up kids and work with teachers..... we actually get a whack of money of which pays for my time [to coordinate the program].....

Not all teachers however were aware there was a budget for VCAL. When asked if the school had a budget for VCAL, a response was:

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4 In 2012 Government funding for VCAL is to be cut (VALA, 2011, para 2)
...yeah, but I had no budget this year – I didn’t understand about budget....I had no idea what came into the school....

It is significant that personal agency contributes to the sustenance of VCAL educators along with collegial support. Additionally they are sustained by seeing students succeed or remain in school. While some VCAL coordinators may have access to the VCAL funding – it appears that funding does not always support the program as intended. VALA has expressed concern about the destination of VCAL funding by saying “VCAL providers need to be accountable for the use of the funding” (VALA, 2011, para 3).

Why VCAL educators think VCAL succeeds

The VCAL program overcomes a number of obstacles to achieve success. Among those obstacles is the regard in which VCAL is held. Henry et al. (2003) identified in the VCAL trial evaluation that negative perceptions of VCAL were a potential impediment to the program. They indicated that:

While parents were very supportive of VCAL, some had noticed that there was a stigma attached to the program and a number cited this as a major issue for them. They wanted something done quickly so that VCAL did not become regarded as a course for “kids who weren’t smart” (Henry et al., 2003, p.140).

Despite the research and preparation in devising a VCAL program; VCAL and the cohort who undertake it are still frequently referred to in derogatory terms. In interviews educators frequently reflected about others’ perceptions of VCAL, but also indicated that VCAL succeeds. This comment came from an educator who taught VCAL in an out of school setting:

…VCAL possibly does have a bad reputation. I guess talking to a lot of schools they tend to think that the dummies go through VCAL and smart kids go through VCE, but that is not the way it is. We just find that VCAL is better because it is hands on applied learning approach and it’s aimed at getting kids into work rather than further study. Not that cuts opportunity for kids, but the kids that we have had [here] dropped out of school long ago pretty much, even though they might have been attending, so quite often you know they are not as educated as the others, or not up to where they should be…

Later the educator highlighted that students liked getting out of the classroom:

…We succeed with VCAL because its hands on and you know they [the students] get out of the classroom in the case of work. So you know it is totally different to what they are used to at school...

VCAL also succeeds in keeping students at school for longer than they might have otherwise:

…I like to see kids leave school at the end of year 12 when they were gonna leave at the end of year 9 - that is a lot of satisfaction I think when they have actually come out of it with some skills and some certificates and hopefully a smile of their face. I mean the reason that I like working with these kids too is because my son is one of them and VCAL wasn’t around when he came through... we don’t get to keep them all, but we do keep a big percentage of them and you know their employment opportunities are much higher than if they left at the end of year 10..

Such results both sustain educators and contribute to the success of VCAL. It was evident that other educators were sustained by similar success stories.
Bringing the Themes together

Applying theoretical knowledge to practice within a similar context to that in which the learning will be ‘applied’ is not a new concept. It has already been accepted as legitimate learning in a range of workplace settings\(^5\) (Billett, 2001). It is, however a relatively recently introduced concept into the senior years of Victorian schooling. Subsequently many educators have no knowledge of the VCAA’s principles of applied learning or how to translate those principles into the curriculum.

Along with highlighting issues that are problematic – such as attempting to use applied learning teaching strategies without knowledge of applied learning pedagogy, lack of organisational support and dealing with challenging behaviours of young people; the narratives include tools that supported the educators such as government funding for VCAL coordination to ease the labour intensive organisational aspects, personal agency and collaboration with professional colleagues. The experiences weren’t the same for everyone.

It is accepted that issues and experiences not necessarily unique to VCAL educators have been identified in the five themes. It is argued however, that two issues that predominately impact on VCAL educators are lack of knowledge about the application of applied learning and responding to the needs of a concentration of young people who are either disengaged from schooling and/or display challenging behaviours. The following words of a VCAL educator highlight the relationship of these two issues:

...there are so many skills you need because the kids that arrive here are high risk sort of kids...

Harrison (2006, p.11) who has conducted research into the ‘understandings of applied learning among beginning teachers’ has already identified that “it takes special qualities to work with these kids”. As previously stated, Kirby (2009, p.4-5 citing Odell, 1990, p.14; Feiman-Nemser, 2001, p.1026; Martinez, 2004) has said of teachers that there is an “expectation that much of what needs to be learnt will occur on the job .....[due to] ... the complexity of the task”. Teacher preparation programs however have traditionally focused on teacher centred learning, while VCAL is based on student centred learning. The learning that many VCAL educators experience is not necessarily a learning continuation process that builds on an already known and established model of teaching and learning. For many educators applied learning is a new model of teaching and learning pedagogy which turns upside down the notion of the educator being at the centre of the learning process.

Conclusion

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\(^5\) Interestingly, Major General Jim Molan (Molan, 2008) who was the Chief of Operations in Iraq during 2004 and responsible for the lives of 300,000 men and women mentions 3 times (at least) – that he learnt to be the Chief of Operations by being in the context where he would work and by doing; “...as in most wars you learn by doing” (p. 69). He was, however, not without support “I watched it all through the operations centre, spending as much time there as I could and learning by osmosis” (p.73). Later in the book Molan describes working closely with his predecessor before taking over responsibility for the infrastructure “My month under Studying Tom Miller had prepared me for running the fight for the infrastructure. I learnt things by doing them” (p.129) [my italic emphasis]. Major General Molan was not a novice officer, inexperienced military leader or untested strategist. Despite his comprehensive experience, knowledge and training, his skill set required further honing for an extremely complex and demanding position for which no prescribed training was available or previous experience was adequate preparation. No metaphorical comparison is intended between conflict in Iraq and education settings. The linkage I make is they are both quite unpredictable workplaces for which complete prior preparation is not possible.
Teacher education frequently undergoes reform and teachers are used to changing curriculum. Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden, Mitchell & Munns (2009, p. 246) indicate that "[o]n-the-job education has always been the norm for teachers, although much of this has necessarily been isolated in their own classrooms". Anecdotally, a colleague who is an ex-teacher suggested to me that a held perception by government departments is that once teachers qualify they should be able to adapt to teach any pedagogy (in this case applied learning). Compare this to other professionals such as doctors, dentists, electricians and plumbers who are only authorised to provide services for equipment and procedures they have been trained, assessed and qualified on. VCAL educators are integral to the success or failure of the programs to scaffold young people into further education and training.

VCAL educators frequently rely on knowledge they already have along with knowledge they create in ‘responsive ‘on-the-job learning’ to prepare and sustain themselves for teaching in VCAL. As a result, and because VCAL programs continue to function, the need for preparatory learning and ongoing support for VCAL educators and programs may have become invisible.

It is believed that there are three immediate issues to be addressed with regard to the learning needs of VCAL educators. Two of the issues have been of concern since the introduction of VCAL. The first issue is the development of an accessible and professional VCAL support program that is able to respond to the demand from VCAL educators for strategies and resources to manage a student cohort that has a concentration of young people with challenging behaviours. The second issue is VCAL funding support to providers to enable VCAL staff to effectively prepare, coordinate and administer VCAL programs. The third issue is the incorporation of applied learning pedagogy into all pre-service teaching courses and other qualifications that prepare teachers and educators to teach applied learning programs such as VCAL.

Ensuring young people transition into the workplace might be seen as an effect of the ‘vocationalism’ of education as a means to increase economic capital (Knipe, et al., 2003 citing Smyth, 2001; Marginson, 1997). The final years of schooling however, are also an important opportunity to contribute to the social capital of young people by building self worth, confidence and independence (Kearns, 2004) which can be developed and facilitated by applied learning programs such as VCAL. Subsequently it would seem appropriate to invest in and support the preparation and professional sustainment of the educators who work in VCAL.

References


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