Learning to be Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) Educators

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

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Deakin University

March, 2017
I am the author of the thesis entitled:

Learning to be Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) Educators

submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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**Presentations**


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### Glossary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>Adult Community Education organisations providing learning opportunities (for example, personal interest, life skills, education) to adults in a wide range of community settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AITSL</td>
<td>Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALTE</td>
<td>Applied Learning Teaching Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Learning</td>
<td>Teaching and learning incorporating constructivist learning theories, meaningful authentic experiences and reflection to promote transformative learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Applied Learning Educator</td>
<td>One who uses Applied Learning pedagogy as the basis for their teaching practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AusVELS</td>
<td>Curriculum incorporating Australian F-10 Curriculum within Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) Curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Curriculum/Learning program</td>
<td>Curriculum structure, content and associated activities projects or tasks undertaken by students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexible Learning Programs</td>
<td>Programs that provide alternative education pathways for young people at risk of disengaging from school and education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GDE(AL)</td>
<td>Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning). Pre-service teacher education course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School</td>
<td>In Victoria, this is regarded as years 7–12 of schooling. May also be referred to as Secondary school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ICT</td>
<td>Information and Communication Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS</td>
<td>Industry Specific Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LLEN</td>
<td>Local Learning and Employment Network</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Definition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MALT</td>
<td>Masters of Applied Learning and Teaching. Pre-service teacher education course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PCET</td>
<td>Post Compulsory Education and Training. Study undertaken after the compulsory years of schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDS</td>
<td>Personal Development Skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PST</td>
<td>Pre-Service Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>QA</td>
<td>Quality Assurance. Process in which VCAL Curriculum content and assessment evidence is formally presented for review to ensure rigor and consistency among VCAL providers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SBNA</td>
<td>School Based New Apprenticeships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWL</td>
<td>Structured Workplace Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TAFE</td>
<td>Technical and Further Education. Organisations which provide the majority of Australia’s vocational education and training.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VALA</td>
<td>Victorian Applied Learning Association</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCAA</td>
<td>Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCAL</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCAL Educator/teacher</td>
<td>Qualified teachers, trainers and professional tradespersons who teach VCAL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCE</td>
<td>Victorian Certificate of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VELS</td>
<td>Victorian Essential Learning Standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VET</td>
<td>Vocational Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIT</td>
<td>Victorian Institute of Teaching</td>
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<tr>
<td>WIL</td>
<td>Work Integrated Learning</td>
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<tr>
<td>WRS</td>
<td>Work Related Skills</td>
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Abstract

Australia, like many nations, has sought to implement education initiatives that facilitate young people to complete 12 years of schooling or its equivalent. The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is an example of an initiative that sought to improve young people’s transition to further education, training and employment by offering an alternative senior school certificate based on active, transformative, experiential learning. While previous research examining the success of the VCAL has focussed on the program and outcomes for young people, there has been limited investigation into the professional learning of the educators who deliver VCAL as an alternative program alongside more conventional modes of schooling.

The purpose of this research is to better understand how youth educators implementing the VCAL program engage with their everyday professional learning in circumstances where their work may be undervalued or their pedagogical teaching and learning approaches contradict the more conventional, academic teaching cultures of high schools.

The study involved interviews with 27 youth educators teaching the VCAL program in high schools, an alternative high school setting, and adult learning contexts. Thematic analysis was applied to the interview data and a selection of narratives is provided here to relate the everyday informal workplace learning and professional experiences of educators. The notion of boundary crossing provides language to explore and describe contradictions, discontinuities and sociocultural differences with which educators grappled as they learned.

The VCAL educators contributing to this research provided accounts of how they were marginalised discursively, economically and politically through low perceptions of vocational education, lack of adequate resources and lack of professional preparation and support. The VCAL educators identified that a general misunderstanding of applied learning and the VCAL impacted on their...
professional learning. Participants voiced concern their pre-service teacher education courses were not adequate preparation for their VCAL practice. In lieu of suitable formal preparation, and in contexts which did not necessarily value or acknowledge their unique learning needs, VCAL educators struggled.

The findings from this research raise significant questions about how the important work of VCAL educators can be better supported through addressing the many contradictions and discontinuities in which they are undertaking their work related professional learning. VCAL programs frequently address the learning needs of young people who are most likely to leave school early. Assisting VCAL educators to be more successful in their work increases the likelihood of successful youth transition.
Chapter One: Introducing the problem

Introduction

This research is a qualitative case study describing the everyday workplace learning experiences of educators as they work in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a senior years’ curriculum program in Victoria, Australia. The VCAL was developed from consideration of educational theories promoting adult learning and youth development. Students undertake experiential learning in authentic contexts in order to develop know how. However, the student-centred teaching and learning pedagogical approaches of the VCAL program are counter cultural to the dominant paradigm of transmissive teaching and learning in the senior years of high school (Blake 2009), yet no expert qualification is required to teach VCAL.

To register as a teacher in Victoria stringent requirements are in place to ensure that applicants meet higher education, industry experience and teacher qualification standards in the relevant curriculum area (VIT 2017). There are also guidelines that state accreditation standards required to teach in specialist areas such as Accounting, Drama, English and Science (VIT 2015). No mention is made of any study or specialist qualifications to teach VCAL.

I present in this research the stories of 20 educators to explain their learning pathways to teach VCAL. What becomes evident in the narrative extracts are the tensions, contradictions, and discontinuities experienced by the educators as they set about constructing their applied learning teaching practice.

In Chapter One I introduce and provide context for the research problem. I justify the warrant for the research, explain the significance, detail the research questions and introduce the research design. Following is an explanation of the benefits and limitations of the research and a description of my own position as researcher. I conclude by providing an overview of the chapters that comprise this thesis.
The context of the problem

A 1985 report into labour market programs in Australia highlighted the difficulties in maintaining full employment while experiencing uncertain fluctuations in economic circumstances (Kirby 1985). Outside of Australia, education programs that could adapt to changing economic and social conditions had been effective (p. 5). Education reduces social disadvantage and at the same time increases both social and economic capital (Boula 2005; Delors 1996; Johnston 1998; Kearns 2004; OECD 2004; Swain 2005; Taylor, Laplage & de Laine 1999; Vinson 1999; Watson 2003). However, for overseas results to be replicated in Australia, education and labour market programs needed to align.

Marginson (1997) explained that incorporating “unemployment and labour market strategy” (p. 170) into formal education required the vocationalisation of education. Vocational programs integrated into the senior years of high school offer opportunity for students to develop both “job-specific skills and competencies” along with “broad-based, transferable work and life skills” (Anderson, Brown & Rushbrook 2004, p. 234).

Implementing policies that supported the vocationalising of education created consequences. Senior high school years’ curriculum and teaching practices needed modification to accommodate new programs. A consequence of modifying curriculum is that “teachers [need] to learn to do things differently” (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004 p. 24).

However, despite the intent of education system managers to change and transform schools to adapt to the changing nature and purpose of education in the 21st century, little has changed and practices within schools remain reflective of late 19th century economic and political constraints (Kemmis, Wilkinson, Edwards-Groves, Hardy, Grootenboer & Bristol 2014, p. 1). This supports previous work that contends most high school learning remains regimented while didactic teaching approaches are often the most dominant form of
instruction in education settings (Bentley 2002; Blake & Gallagher 2009; Boomer 1985; Groundwater-Smith, Brennan, McFadden, Mitchell & Munns 2009; Townsend 2007).

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a student learning centred curriculum program that reflects the vocationalisation of education. The program aims to support and prepare young people during their senior years of high school for work and life in the 21st century. VCAL was developed after a ministerial review of education and training policy of the senior high school years in Victoria (Kirby 2000). The aim of the policy review was to improve participation and engagement in the later years of school and young people’s subsequent transition to education, training or work. Development and introduction of new learning programs and changes in educational policy impact the professional practice of teachers who deliver them (Blake 2009; Cochran-Smith 2005; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Marsh 2010; Sikes 1992; Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto 2009; Welch 2007). The introduction of VCAL was no exception and required teachers and schools to adapt to new ways of thinking. Research by Kamp (2006) however documented that introduction of new student pathways in Victorian schools did not necessarily result in changing the ways those schools operated. This is not surprising given that teachers can be resistant to changing their theories of teaching and learning (Angus 2012).

The introduction of VCAL required teachers to have “new types of knowledge and skills” to support their ability to develop meaningful learning programs linked to contemporary issues or partnered with organisations within the wider community (Blake & Gallagher 2009, p. 62). Partnerships with industry and community represent authentic learning opportunities that are central to the VCAL program (Blake & Gallagher 2009). Applied learning pedagogies also include experiential learning, constructivist learning, distributed cognition, multiple intelligences and consideration of differing learning styles. As Ash and Clayton (2009) argue
Applied learning pedagogies share a design fundamental: the nurturing of learning and growth through a reflective, experiential process that takes students out of traditional classroom settings. The approach is grounded in the conviction that learning is maximized when it is active, engaged, and collaborative. Each applied learning pedagogy provides students with opportunities to connect theory and practice, to learn in unfamiliar contexts, to interact with others unlike themselves, and to practice using knowledge and skills. (p. 25)

Unfortunately, practice architectures in schools (Kemmis et al. 2014) frequently contradict, or do not support, the use of these types of applied learning pedagogies. The term “practice architectures” describes the discursive, economic and political dimensions that are represented in the sayings, knowing and doings unique to each organisation (Kemmis et al. 2014). In this thesis, the term assists in providing language to describe the social practices, perceptions and actions that privilege and reproduce didactic, transmissive pedagogies and marginalise active, experiential applied learning experiences.

Teaching and learning approaches used in VCAL programs may be counter cultural to existing teaching and learning approaches in provider settings or to educators’ previous experiences. Langenbach (1994) warns that if the setting in which curriculum is delivered remains antithetical to the purposes and goals of the curriculum, there is little hope that the curriculum will ever be developed, or, if developed, ever accomplish its purposes and goals. (p. 16)

Frequently VCAL is perceived as non-academic (Blake 2009) and because it promotes skills for life and work through active experiential learning is subsequently compartmentalised as vocational education (Blake & Gallagher 2009). Billett (2003) has argued that a “key problem for vocational education curriculum and pedagogy” has been a “perception ... that it only needs to account for low levels of outcomes” (p. 7). Hogben (1970) argues this perception has developed as a result of curriculum frameworks which are based on behavioural theories of teaching, learning and assessment which are not regarded as providing rich learning opportunities (cited in Billett 2003, p. 7).
Historically, behaviourist theories of teaching and learning have been regarded as suitable for vocational education, but not for “general education” which is regarded as preparation for university pathways (Billett 2003, p. 7). Despite both pathways being outcome based, vocational education is frequently held in lesser regard. Billett (2003) finds this ironic, given that many university courses to which students aspire are vocationally orientated.

Bleazby (2015) has explored in detail the hierarchy of subjects within school curriculum. She particularly examined why subjects containing “supposedly abstract” theoretical knowledge appear to be valued more than “subjects associated with concrete experience” (p. 672). This approach supports the work of Jenkins (2014) who argued that vocationally related learning has less prestige than subjects regarded as academic in nature.

VCAL is not a subject, it is a learning pathway in which learning reflects “transformative interaction with one’s socio-cultural environment” (Bleazby 2015, p. 672). As a result it can be categorised with other forms of applied learning, such as woodwork and outdoor education, which Bleazby posits are seen as having least prestige in schools. Bleazby highlights that perceptions of prestige within curriculum hierarchies do not align with perceptions of relevance of the learning to everyday life. Vocationally related learning which results in concrete skills can lead to work in high demand professions such as plumber and electrician while “highly abstract” (p. 673) or theoretical curriculum, though esteemed during the learning process, can later appear irrelevant in day to day living.

Subsequently VCAL educators work in a context full of contradictions, discontinuities and challenges. VCAL provides students with real-world skills and improves their potential to transition into further education, training and the workplace. The contradiction is that applied teaching and learning pedagogies are devalued compared to other learning. Additionally, the sociocultural differences between VCAL educators’ current pedagogy and applied learning
pedagogies create discontinuities and boundaries that must be negotiated in order to continue teaching. At the same time, existing practice architectures in schools are unsupportive of the resourcing of VCAL. It is in these contextual conditions that VCAL educators work.

My focus in this research is investigating the everyday workplace learning experiences of educators as they begin and work within the VCAL program.

**Why explore the professional adult learning experiences of VCAL educators**

Several circumstances provide warrant for my study. Firstly there appears little, if any, impartial critical research that explores the professional learning experiences of educators who work in VCAL programs. Since the introduction of VCAL some commissioned research has been conducted on evaluating the VCAL program (Henry, Dalton, Wilde, Walsh, & Wilde 2003; Walsh, Beeson, Blake & Milne 2005) and there is research on young people who undertake VCAL study and the benefits of the program (for example, Blake 2009; Myconos 2014; te Riele, Wilson, Wallace, McGinty & Lewthwaite 2016; Thies 2008). However the professional adult learning experiences of VCAL educators as they learn to teach in the program do not appear to be documented. This is surprising in view of emphasis in both the Kirby review (2000) and subsequent reports (Henry et al. 2003; Walsh et al. 2005) on the importance of VCAL educators and other staff being “involved with the VCAL initiative” (Henry et al. 2003, p. 18).

A second reason for this study is that the VCAL program “is based on adult learning and youth development principles” and applied learning (VCAA 2014f, p. 7). Applied teaching and learning pedagogies differ from “traditional lectures” (Parker, Ashe, Boersma, Hicks & Bennett 2015, p. 92). As an example, a report on an applied learning program developed in the southern United States of America highlighted the difference in teaching skills needed by educators. The program, like VCAL, was developed to support students who were intending to
go into the workplace or undertake postsecondary training (Bottoms, Presson & Johnson 1992). To teach in an applied way, teachers in the program needed to change teaching and learning approaches they had previously used, including ensuring there was a focus on forming pedagogical relationships with their students. The success of the program at Summerville High School in South Carolina was argued as dependant on “[p]roviding teachers with necessary staff development and materials” (Bottoms, Presson & Johnson 1992, p. 52).

A third reason supporting my undertaking this study is that the VCAL pathway characteristically has a student cohort with a predominance of young people who demonstrate challenging behaviours, or who are regarded as at risk of not successfully transitioning from school into further education, training or employment (Blake 2009; Broadbent & Papadopoulos 2013; Harrison 2006; Henry et al. 2003; Pritchard & Anderson 2006). This is particularly the case in Adult and Community Education (ACE) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) settings where educators are frequently dealing with young people for whom mainstream education in schools has not been successful. Pritchard and Anderson (2006) conducted research that found

[m]any 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 of TAFE institutes and their staff. (p. 1)

Other characteristics of the VCAL student cohort include a high number of young people who have diverse learning styles and a concentration of young people with special needs (Blake 2009; Thies 2008). Since the introduction of VCAL, there have been calls for greater support for VCAL educators particularly in ACE and TAFE settings where educators may not have the skill set to deal with young people who frequently exhibit challenging behaviours (Harrison 2006; Knipe, Ling, Bottrell & Keamy 2003; Pritchard & Anderson 2006). There does not appear to have been a response to these calls (Schulz 2012).
A fourth reason that provides warrant for studying the learning experiences of VCAL educators is a gap in knowledge about how educators cope when working with a curriculum approach that differs from other Victorian senior school programs, for example, the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). All school curriculum in Victoria is developed and authorised by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA). However, while the VCAA explicitly details VCE learning outcomes and subject content (for example, see VCAA 2006), for VCAL, only learning outcomes are prescribed (for example, see VCAA 2008). VCAL educators, by negotiating with students, develop content to meet learning outcomes and tailor it to meet the interests and needs of the cohort.

The prescriptive nature of the VCE, when compared to the negotiated nature of the VCAL, provides some interesting contradictions about the two senior years pathways. Hartley (1997) has argued curriculum “is ... always set within its socio-historical context” (p. 43). Another interpretation could be that curriculum creates socio-historical contexts. As an example, each year the VCAA approves a list of prescribed VCE texts for use in English classes (see VCAA 2006) from which teachers make selections. Subsequently texts that young people in VCE study, mirror perception by the English teacher in a cultural and temporal moment as they select from the prescribed list, as to what young people should reflect on and know.

In contrast, little direction is provided to VCAL educators regarding content, other than it should meet the purpose statement of the relevant Skills Strand\(^1\) (VCAA 2008). VCAL literacy students choose texts based on their own interests. Subsequently content, themes and perspectives investigated by students vary between individuals. The lack of prescribed content in the VCAL unit is in accord with the VCAA (2011b) principles of applied learning. VCAL educators identify and negotiate appropriate curriculum content to align with student interests, abilities and aspirations. The negotiation process is, however, time consuming.

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\(^1\) Explanation of the VCAL curriculum structure is provided in Chapter Two
Often the educators will not know the interests or abilities of their students prior to the commencement of teaching. Educators may be unaware of opportunities for learning in their local community or of potential for partnerships with local industry through which they can develop projects, tasks and activities.

The level of detail provided by the VCAA for VCAL assessment also differs between curriculum. For example, guidelines to VCE educators are specific regarding content of assessment, processes and marking (VCAA 2006). The VCAL guidelines describe what the student is to do, but do not dictate the specific tasks or content students must engage with in order to meet learning outcomes nor do they indicate what evidence of assessment is to be collected (VCAA 2008). The VCAL educator must develop projects, activities, tasks and detail the fair, reliable, valid and authentic evidence (physical artefacts) collected to provide confirmation that each student has met (all elements of) learning outcomes (VCAA 2006; 2010; 2012).

Tasks and activities that students complete to meet VCAL learning outcomes and evidence generated to demonstrate the meeting of those learning outcomes will naturally vary between VCAL providers. To guarantee rigor VCAL educators are required to participate in the Quality Assurance process that interrogates what they have taught and how they have assessed learning. Providers of VCAL must participate to ensure there is a common understanding and consistency among teachers regarding assessment judgements [sic] and the design of assessment tasks for the three VCAL levels. (VCAA 2014c, para one)

The intentions of regular Quality Assurance include:

- Establish[ment of] regional benchmarks for consistency in the assessment of VCAL levels and VCAL learning outcomes
- Provid[ing] advice to VCAL providers that will enable them to confidently design VCAL unit assessment tasks and to make assessment judgements [sic] about

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2 Quality Assurance is commonly referred to in VCAL discourse by the acronym QA. In this thesis, for the benefit of the reader I have chosen not to use the acronym.

3 For more information about Quality Assurance see http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vcal/providers/quality/index.aspx
successful achievement of the learning outcomes for VCAL units. (VCAA 2014, para 4)

Separate Quality Assurance panels are held for validation of planning and moderation of assessment decisions. Quality Assurance is conducted each year, over several stages, during whole day sessions supervised by the VCAA. Representatives from VCAL providers in the Quality Assurance regional subgroup meet and participate in (concurrent) small collaborative groups under guidance of panel leaders who are experienced in the process. Provider representatives bring (as required) their completed VCAL assessment templates or portfolios of student evidence to compare and discuss with the other participants and Quality Assurance panel leaders. As can be seen negotiation, development and quality assurance of VCAL curriculum content and assessment is a time consuming process for educators and one they do not experience while working in other school curricula.

When the VCAL was first introduced, VCAL providers received funding for VCAL coordinators who assisted VCAL educators in identifying and liaising with community and industry partners to develop meaningful learning programs. In August 2011 the Victorian government announced a cut in funding to organisations for VCAL coordination. In response the Victorian Applied Learning Association (VALA), a professional organisation for applied learning practitioners (see http://vala.asn.au/vision-mission-goals/), released a statement reinforcing that VCAL coordination is frequently complex and 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)

For VCAL programs to be effective they require adequate resources; however this can challenge the notion of efficient education delivery. Schwartzman (2010) argues that effective applied teaching and learning which is student centred clashes with the imperative of efficiency. Movements toward intensifying educational experiences, such as using “high-impact educational practices”
(Kuh, 2008) that carry substantial experiential components, run against the current of efficiency. In fact, most educational practices acquire their status as high-impact precisely because they require dedicating more energy, time, and resources than required for other educational endeavours. Raising impact may lower efficiency. (p. 5)

As a result student experiences and learning in applied learning programs may be impacted by the ways provider settings manage the conflicting imperatives of effectiveness and efficiency.

Integrating thought with action (or promoting action from thought) to support learning from experience is an inherent theoretical foundation of the VCAL program. However as Argyris and Schön (1974) argue, learning through doing is often equated with vocational training and subsequently undervalued

Integrating thought with action effectively has plagued philosophers, frustrated social scientists and eluded professional practitioners for years. It is one of the most prevalent and least understood problems of our age. Universities have shunned it on the ground that effective action was too practical or – the best kiss of death – vocational. (p. 3. See also Bleazby 2015)

Continuing negative perceptions of vocational training may add to the challenges VCAL educators experience in the cultural contexts of their workplaces.

**Perceptions of vocationally related education**

VCAL is frequently referred to in terms such as “easier pathway” “alternative” and “other” which devalue teachers, students and hands on teaching and learning approaches used in the program (Blake 2009). Blake also argued that the introduction of VCAL presented significant cultural and pedagogical challenges to the dominant academic paradigm that has existed within most secondary schools since the 1950s. (p. 45)

Blake (2009) goes on to propose that “pedagogical and sociological challenges” encountered by the implementation of VCAL represent “the historically limited capacity of schools – as social institutions – to change their culture” (p. 46). Along with being pedagogically counter cultural to dominant school cultures of
teaching and learning, related perceptions of vocationally orientated training programs result in VCAL being regarded as a lesser study pathway.

As I have already indicated, programs that use hands on, or applied approaches to prepare young adults for workplaces have historically had poor regard in the wider community (Brown & Sutton 2008), compared to theoretical or academic study that is generally seen as providing a pathway to university. For a number of years there has been a notion that technical pathways, and by association the vocationally orientated VCAL, are associated with working class students, and subsequently the pathways are not of equal status with the more academically regarded VCE. A report by Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982) identified the divisive manner in the way schools managed students “who can ‘use their heads’ and those who ‘are good with their hands’, the ‘rough’ and the ‘respectable’” (p. 194). Additionally they reported teachers found “ruling-class” schools “stimulating and encouraging places to teach in” and “working-class schools … disruptive and wearing” (p. 194).

Since the report by Connell et al. (1982), technical schools have closed while vocational programs are now incorporated into both VCAL and VCE study (see VCAA 2016). However VET, and work-ready programs such as VCAL, continue to be viewed as lesser by some students, teachers, schools and members of the wider community (Brown & Sutton 2008). Henry et al. (2003) identified during the VCAL trial evaluation that negative perceptions of VCAL were a potential impediment to the program. They argued

[w]hile 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)

Jenkins’ (2014) study of Home Economics teachers’ agency during curriculum change in Queensland considered the degree to which academic teachers are aware of the teaching context that vocational teachers experience. Jenkins drew
on Little and McLaughlin (1993) to argue that “academic and vocational teachers occupy two separate worlds in most schools” (p. 11) and that teachers of subjects without a vocational component have little understanding or appreciation of the value of these specialist subjects in a school curriculum. Teachers and Administrators who have little understanding of the subject and its specific needs are making decisions in schools without understanding the consequences of these decisions. (pp. 11–12)

Poor perceptions might also be formed about cohorts who undertake vocational programs. Pritchard and Anderson (2009) reported the following feedback from a Youth Pathways program worker at a TAFE

[...]any teachers continued to be resistant towards the presence of ‘youth at risk’ and ‘labelled’ the VCAL program for ‘school drop-outs’. At times providers might display little regard for VCAL. (p. 7)

Blake (2009) explored the pedagogical experiences of applied learning students and teachers. He believed 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” (p. 50 citing Teese 2000; Boston 1998; Henry et al., 2003). In other work Blake (2004) highlighted that students, parents and teachers received mixed messages about “vocational and applied learning programs” (p. 5). On the one hand, the benefits of hands-on learning approaches were promoted while on the other there were suggestions that VCAL was a dumping ground and provided limited pathway potential. His thesis also questioned whether there really needed to be a “pedagogical dichotomy between applied and academic learning” (p. 7) arguing that applied learning approaches have validity in both contexts.

In a wider global context the valuing of applied learning also varies. In some countries, for example New Zealand, Qatar and Hong Kong, applied learning is valued and promoted as a point of difference (Henderson 2014; The Peninsula 2014; 7thSpaceInteractive/EUPBPressOffice 2014). In Canada, while applied learning appears to be promoted (Zia 2015), it is not necessarily valued. Rushowy (2013) describes an example from Ontario (Canada) of a low
perception of applied learning due to a belief that courses based on applied learning lead to failure and poor job prospects.

The differences in VCAL curriculum and assessment guidelines, the characteristics of the cohort, the regard in which vocational training and applied learning is held and the different skills needed to use applied teaching and learning strategies provide the context for the research questions.

**The research questions**

Qualitative research questions guide my descriptive case study of the workplace learning of VCAL educators. The specific research questions I ask are:

- How do VCAL educators learn about VCAL curriculum and facilitating applied learning?
- What consequences does context have on the professional practice or learning of VCAL educators?
- What professional discontinuities or contradictions do VCAL educators experience as they teach VCAL?

The following section provides a brief introduction to the methodological underpinning which investigates these questions.

**Introducing the research design**

My data was gathered through conversations, guided by open-ended questions, with 27 VCAL educators. The concept of boundary crossing (for example Akkerman & Bakker 2011; Star 1989; Star & Griesemer 1989; Suchman 1994; Wenger 2000) is used to describe the learning of educators as they begin and work in the VCAL program.

The sociocultural differences between VCAL and other curricula (described earlier), creates a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky 1978) for VCAL educators when moving between curricula. Boundary crossing provides
language to describe movement, interactions and learning experiences of VCAL educators within that zone which result in “continuity in action or interaction [as they teach in the VCAL program] ... despite sociocultural differences” (Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 133). It also provides language to describe discontinuities, contradictions, or barriers to learning experienced by VCAL educators.

Discussion of the research design continues in Chapter Four, while discussion of boundary crossing theory continues in Chapter Two.

**The data collection settings**

VCAL educators who participated in my research worked in a range of VCAL provider settings including: schools, Adult Community Education (ACE), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and an alternative school setting. Further detail is provided in Chapter Four.

**Benefits of this research**

My case study makes the first significant contribution to understanding the learning experienced by VCAL educators as they work.

Specifically my research will contribute to existing knowledge by:

- describing the everyday workplace learning experiences of VCAL educators
- describing challenges, discontinuities and contradictions experienced by applied learning educators
- highlighting differences in teaching VCAL curriculum to other curriculum

This research also contributes to existing knowledge in other areas. For example:

- A recent review of informal learning literature by Van Noy, James and Bedley identified a need for greater knowledge about ways in which
informal learning occurs (2016). This research describes the informal learning experienced by VCAL educators in their everyday work.

- There has also been increasing interest in examining unplanned learning taking place within workplaces (Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek & Dochy 2014; Matthews & Candy 1999, p. 49-50). This research describes the everyday unanticipated learning, which enables continuity of teaching for VCAL educators.

- Soini, Pietarinen, and Pyhältö (2016) believe there is a lack of knowledge about teacher professional agency in their own classroom learning. This research describes the role of self as a boundary-crossing object.

Research limitations

This study does not explore the quality or success of VCAL programs. Neither does my research investigate the validity of applied learning pedagogical teaching strategies used by participants. I cannot comment on the competency of VCAL educators who were interviewed or their ability to engage the students they taught.

All participants spoke of their belief in VCAL as an engagement program, and of the obstacles they had negotiated in their development and delivery of the VCAL program. Specifically they highlighted solutions and strategies they employed to overcome challenges and limitations. It may seem strange, but I often thought that the educators who I did not speak with had the potential to add further value to my project: for example, educators who hated teaching VCAL and educators who could not establish continuity or develop an applied learning pedagogy to move through the sociocultural boundary of difference surrounding VCAL.

My research is confined to describing and understanding the learning experiences of educators as they teach in the VCAL program. I describe how they boundary cross and the challenges they experience while doing so.
Clarke (2013) indicate undertaking qualitative research results "in more than one way of making meaning from the data" (p. 20 italics in original). This thesis represents my interpretation of the data from one contextual viewpoint to answer the research questions.

**My applied learning space**

I know from my own university teaching in applied learning pre-service teacher education courses that pre-service teachers struggle to understand the nature of the VCAL program, what applied learning is, what applied learning teaching strategies are and how they complement each other to result in applied learning. I hear pre-service teachers’ stories from their Applied Learning Teaching Experience placements of how experienced educators, who they work with, struggle with the VCAL curriculum documents and how to develop, implement and teach an applied learning program. I regularly hear from pre-service teachers that they have observed VCAL taught using teacher centred strategies. I have listened to teachers, parents and students undervaluing VCAL, educators who teach it and students who undertake it. Fortunately, stories also exist of how VCAL supported and sustained young people and the difference it has made to their lives and future study pathways (for example see http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/excellenceawards/vcalachievement/speech-ben.aspx).

Although I use applied learning pedagogical approaches in my teaching, I am not a VCAL practitioner. This challenges Murphy’s (2013) prediction that “[m]any of those engaged in educational research tend to arrive via the linked but distinct field of professional practice” (p. 7). At the beginning of my research, I wondered whether this would cause me to feel, or be regarded as, an outsider (Dwyer & Buckle 2009) in the field of VCAL. As I engaged in conversations I soon realised my understanding of the language (Dwyer & Buckle 2009 citing Asselin 2003) and Discourse (Charteris 2016) of VCAL in regards to structure, curriculum development, quality assurance requirements and intended nature of VCAL.
allowed me entry to the VCAL community. While Murphy (2013) cautions that 
an insider might have their “intellectual judgement ... clouded” from previous 
“immersion in the hothouse of educational politics” in a particular practice area, 
subsequently “[o]bjectivity can suffer” (p. 7), my intention as an informed but 
critical outsider is to bring objectivity to the following discussion.

Summary

In Chapter One I have introduced and provided context for the research problem 
and identified the research questions. I have stated the significance of the 
research, defined my position in the thesis and suggested limitations of the 
findings. Chapter Two commences by providing explanation of the VCAL 
curriculum structure and an overview of applied teaching and learning theory 
and approaches VCAL educators must use. Following is an expanded explanation 
of how boundary crossing theory will be applied in this research, including 
defining the boundaries to be used and the assumptions on which the research is 
based. Chapter Three presents a review of literature which provides insights 
into what is already known about everyday workplace, informal and adult 
learning, including the impact of life experiences and cultural dispositions. 
Chapter Four explains my research design and methodological approach. In 
 Chapters Five, Six and Seven I present collections of narrative extracts relating 
the everyday workplace learning experiences of VCAL educators as they teach. 
Chapter Eight describes participants’ teaching and learning experiences within 
Akkerman and Bakker’s (2011) dialogic stages of boundary crossing. In Chapter 
Nine I conclude by summarising my findings against the research questions, 
suggest opportunities for future research and provide recommendations.
Chapter Two: Introducing VCAL and boundary crossing

Introduction

This research explores the everyday adult workplace learning experienced by Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) educators as they manage tensions and contradictions between modes of teaching practice created by the introduction and rapid expansion of the VCAL program. The next two chapters are informed by a systemic review of research literature to provide a foundation and context for later discussion of data and response to the research questions.

In this chapter I begin by explaining the introduction and structure of the VCAL program in Victoria, Australia. Following this I unpack the VCAA principles of applied learning which guide educators in their teaching and learning practice and are understood to be integral to the success of the VCAL program. I then continue discussion, introduced in Chapter One, of boundary crossing theory and how it is able to provide a framework to describe discontinuities, ambiguities and professional learning experienced by VCAL educators as they go about their everyday work. I conclude by defining the boundaries of the field, and by association, the sites where learning occurs as teachers move between different modes of teaching practice.

Introducing VCAL into Victoria

The VCAL is an accredited senior-level schooling certificate program. Young people who are most likely to seek a pathway directly to employment or further education upon leaving school are frequently directed to VCAL (2008a). Undertaking VCAL can also lead to university study, however additional bridging study may be required.

VCAL is offered in a broad range of youth learning contexts including Victorian high schools, Adult Community Education (ACE), Technical and Further Education...
(TAFE) and other Registered Training Organisations (RTOs). In Victoria VCAL and the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) are both senior years’ pathway options however the VCE is generally regarded as the dominant curriculum in preparing students for university study. Both the VCAL and the VCE pathways are able to incorporate nationally accredited study for Vocational Education and Training (VET) qualifications.

As indicated in Chapter One, education and training in the senior high school years of Victorian schooling underwent significant policy review in the late 1990s (Kirby 2000). Previous work had already been undertaken in the form of the Finn (1991) report and Carmichael (1992) review recommending and proposing changes to education and training in the senior years of high school. Changes had been suggested in regard to increasing access and equity by proposing individual pathways which increased entry level training to vocational pathways for a larger number of young people. The pathways would further opportunities and encourage aspirations of young people (Blake 2009; VCAA 2014d; VCAA 2015).

Among the recommendations of the Kirby (2000) 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 Post Compulsory Education and Training (PCET) (p. 8). During 2001 and 2002 the Victorian government created 31 Local Learning and Employment Networks (LLENs) to assist in the school to work transition of young people. These networks were intended to strengthen relationships between education providers and industry workplaces. At the same time, additional pathways and qualifications were developed and provided for young people aged 15 – 18 years of age undertaking years 11 and 12 of school. These programs provided young people with authentic experiential learning alternatives and/or supplemented the traditional classroom delivery of VCE. The VCAL was one of these alternatives. It was trialled in 2002 in a limited number of schools and introduced widely into Victorian schools, ACE and TAFE in 2003 (Henry et al. 2003).
The development of the VCAL occurred during a time when the declining youth employment market was forcing many young people to stay at school. However, there was also a need to better engage young people in education during their final years of schooling (Kirby 2000). Research showed that young Victorians, who left school before completing Year 12 or its equivalent, were more likely to experience poor transitions to employment and faced the risk of long-term unemployment (Blake 2009; Henry et al. 2003). More recent research continues to reinforce the importance of young people completing Year 12 or equivalent schooling in order to successfully transition into further education, training or the workplace (ABS 2011; Hattie 2015; Mitchell Institute 2015; Plows & te Riele 2016; Ryan 2011).

The VCAL offered a flexible curriculum structure and a hands-on approach to learning. The applied approach of the VCAL program was seen as providing real possibilities and opportunities for young people’s deeper engagement in the final years of schooling (VALA 2013). The introduction of VCAL was intended to support national economic growth by strengthening connections and vocational pathways between education and industry and to better prepare young people to make the school to work transition (Kirby 2000).

VCAL is a suitable pathway for students of any ability. Since its introduction however, there has been a tendency for schools to direct young people to VCAL who are regarded as being at risk of not engaging in education or at risk of not transitioning from school into further education, training and employment (Blake 2009; Broadbent & Papadopoulos 2013). Additionally, young people who demonstrate challenging behaviours are often directed to VCAL (Blake 2009; Broadbent & Papadopoulos 2013; Harrison 2006; Henry et al. 2003; Pritchard & Anderson 2006). Students with special learning needs may also be directed to VCAL (Department of Human Services 2009).
**VCAL as a new mode of practice**

Dewey (1938) argued that formulating new theoretical approaches in education “means the necessity of the introduction of a new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice” (p. vi). Increasing young people’s engagement and participation in schooling to increase the likelihood of their completing 12 years of education required a new mode of educational practice to ensure engagement in the senior years of education.

The implementation of VCAL as a senior years’ curriculum introduced a new mode of practice into an environment that had traditionally relied on didactic forms of teaching and learning. Applied learning in the form of active, transformative, experiential learning provides the pedagogical foundation for all study in VCAL. Applied learning is “active learning at its most literal level” (Schwartzman & Henry 2009, p. 4) as learning is intended to occur as theory is applied to practice in authentic or real world environments (VCAA 2011b).

The understanding of applied learning varies in and across nations and settings (VCAA 2011b; Harrison 2006; Shacklock 2006; Malyn-Smith 2004; Schulz 2015). Programs may be described as using applied learning, but do not necessarily explain how applied learning is understood pedagogically within the context, or program. For example applied learning is frequently reported as used within Higher Education settings in the United States of America, Singapore, Australia, and Canada through the incorporation of workplace learning components completed with industry partners or other authentic learning contexts (for examples see Corpuz 2015, MWSU 2014, Philomin 2015, *The Evening Sun* 2014). In other countries such as New Zealand this approach is referred to as cooperative learning (Lucas 2015). Such opportunities provide learning and development opportunities in industries or vocations aligned with students’ career and employment aspirations. Underpinning this approach is an intention to connect students to real life organisations such as ‘Target’, a large discount
retailer in the United States of America with many stores across the country, to solve real industry problems by applying learning (Daddona 2015). Higher Education providers such as the University of North Carolina (United States of America) offer and promote programs which focus on community partnerships and engagement or value service learning associated with workplace experience (for example see EKU 2012, Port City Daily 2015). While these forms of applied learning have been common in Higher Education for some time, in Australia using applied learning in the senior years of high school challenges the existing and dominant mode of teaching and learning.

When the conceptual construction of applied learning is discussed, a number of writers (Blake & Gallagher 2009; Downing 2015; Schank, Berman & Kimberli 1999; Schwartzman & Henry, 2009) refer to and build on Ryle’s (1949) work on theory of the mind. Ryle (1949) argued there are clear distinctions between knowing that (or know what) and knowing how to complete a task or activity. For example knowing the rules of a game of chess (knowing that) does not immediately equate to knowing how to play chess. Ryle (1949) argues that the process of gaining facts (theory) about chess is only one step in the process of acquiring skill or ability to play chess (know how).

In Biggs and Tang’s (2007) work on constructively aligning learning outcomes and assessment with teaching and learning activities, they use the terms declarative knowledge and functioning knowledge to highlight a similar dichotomy. The two terms allow them to differentiate between knowing facts and knowledge that can be constructed from facts. For example, the periodic table used in chemistry can be regarded as factual or declarative knowledge. Using information from the periodic table to predict compositions of unknown matter or in analysing relationships between known and unknown chemical elements can be regarded as constructed or functioning knowledge.

In VCAL there is an emphasis on teaching and learning approaches which develop students’ functioning knowledge, or know how. This is developed by
encouraging and nurturing student ability to apply knowledge they gained from learning in one context to activities and tasks they undertake in a different context. However, as already indicated, applied teaching and learning approaches used in VCAL challenge the more conventional modes of practice in senior schooling (I expand upon this later in the chapter as I unpack the VCAA (2011b) principles of applied learning). Subsequently teaching in VCAL requires educators to cross a number of boundaries. One boundary is that of becoming familiar with an applied approach to teaching and learning, for example, to move from a dominant approach of teaching facts and theoretical knowledge (Masters 2015) to a teaching practice that supports students in applying concepts to authentic problems. Another boundary is developing integrated learning opportunities across knowledge domains, for example incorporating literacy, numeracy and work related skills into learning projects. Importantly an integrated learning approach mirrors the way knowledge is used in everyday life, as “[a]dults do not read, write, speak or complete mathematical tasks in isolation, but in meaningful contexts” (VCAA 2014e, para 3). A third boundary is the reliance of VCAL on partnerships with community organisations and other educational providers. VCAL educators must undertake ongoing collaboration outside the VCAL provider setting (VCAA 2014f; VCAA 2016). Akkerman and Bakker (2011a) argue that boundaries are experienced when working across “different institutionalized practices“ and “interact[ing] with people from different professions, disciplines and cultures” (p. 1).

VCAL educators may need to adjust their perception of what an educator does and who they are as an educator. In VCAL teaching and learning, educators are not regarded as a distributor of knowledge and the students as passive spectators or receptacles. This approach is what John Dewey calls the Spectator Theory of Knowledge (Kulp 1992) and what Freire (1993) calls the banking concept of education. In an applied learning classroom “[e]veryone is considered to be both a teacher and a learner” (Diffily & Sassman 2002, p. 1). The educator and their students work together to construct knowledge that provides students with skills and ability in order to know how to do something, rather than simply
knowing facts about what to do. However, an emphasis on *know how* rather than *know what* (Ryle 1949; Schank, Berman & Macpherson 1999) may be regarded as counter cultural to thinking which positions school as a place where curriculum, knowing and student learning occurs in certain ways to comply with certain expectations (Kemmis et al. 2014; Wenger 1998).

Established methods of education value students’ ability to store “generalizable forms of knowledge” and “reproduce the knowledge under exam conditions” (Blake & Gallagher 2009, p. 62). Schank, Berman and Macpherson (1999) argue that schools’ focus on imparting fact-based knowledge was a response to the industrial age and high employment opportunities (student destinations) in factory production lines. Routine tasks did not require complex skill preparation and could easily, and quickly, be taught in situ (p. 164). However, Schank, Berman and Macpherson (1999) maintain that “life requires us to do, more than it requires us to know, in order to function” (p. 164 italics in original). They subsequently assert schools need to adapt their teaching and learning to ensure students are able to achieve goals that are “relevant and meaningful to them” (pp. 165-166). VCAL seeks to achieve this, but entrenched perceptions and practices in schools regarding pedagogical approaches and the conduct of education can create barriers, which impede the success of the program.

**Practice Architectures**

As briefly mentioned in Chapter One, longstanding ways of thinking about the purpose of education and conduct in, and of, schools are examples of what Kemmis et al. (2014) refer to as practice architectures. Practice architectures are influenced by historical factors, for example the needs of industry and governments along with everyday social practices that give stability and continuity to life. Subsequently there is both transformation and reproduction in the ways things are done (2014, pp. 2–3). Kemmis et al. (2014) argue that three types of dimensions are always present: “cultural-discursive arrangements” (p. 4) which represent how communication occurs, “material-economic arrangements”
(p. 4) which represent the physical limitations and “social-political arrangements” (p. 4) which represent relationships. Practice architectures are also influenced by “practice landscape” and “traditions” (p. 5). This means that current and future actions are expected to reflect historically and contextually established ways of doing things.

Existing practice architectures in education represent a challenge for the new order of conceptions created by the introduction of VCAL. Traditionally adults judge what learning is needed by young people in order to meet their (the young peoples’) future needs. As a result, learning content which may have no relevance or connection to “the present life-experience of the learner” (Dewey 1938, p. 92) is developed.

The VCAL program structure incorporates Dewey’s (1938) notion that the contemporary environment of the learner is important to the learning process, and subsequently included when developing relevant authentic learning opportunities (p. 5). However Dewey possibly did not foresee what Kemmis et al. (2014) have identified, that

we cannot transform practices without composing new ways of understanding the world, making it comprehensible in new discourses; without constructing new ways of doing things, produced out of new material and economic arrangements; and without new ways of relating to one another, connecting people and things in new social and political arrangements – all ‘bundled together’ in new projects of schooling for education. (p. 6)

VCAL can be understood in terms of a new order of conceptions introduced into the later years of schooling which challenge existing practice architectures in all three of the dimensions expounded by Kemmis et al. (2014). On a cultural-discursive level it requires stakeholders to learn new terminologies and engage with constructivist theories of teaching and learning. On a material-economic level VCAL challenges the way that learning spaces are perceived, requires access to authentic learning contexts and requires the forming of partnerships between schools, industry and community groups. On a social-political level it challenges perceptions of vocationally related education in the curriculum.
hierarchy.

At the same time that VCAL challenges existing dimensions of practice architectures in education, it also challenges educational culture and history, which normalised the existing conceptions. How do the VCAL educators manage their learning within the tension of these sociocultural contradictions and education traditions?

To provide context for later data analysis showing how VCAL educators are managing their professional learning, an outline of the structure and nature of the VCAL program follows.

**VCAL curriculum structure**

The intention of VCAL is for students to develop practical skills and knowledge through applied learning pedagogical approaches and a flexible curriculum structure that is able to adapt to their individual needs and interests. Teaching and learning activities focus on developing literacy, numeracy, and promoting general employability skills such as problem solving, civic mindedness and teamwork. The inclusion within VCAL programs of community based service learning promotes qualities of social responsibility and good citizenship.

The VCAL curriculum is based around four areas of study: Work Related Skills Strand, Personal Development Skills Strand, Literacy & Numeracy Strand and Industry Specific Skills Strand. Bentley (2002) argues that “[e]ducational institutions have, overwhelmingly been structured around organisational principles which emphasis hierarchy, a vertical division of labour and subjects, standardised entry and progression” (p. 5). The VCAL curriculum is an example of a program that challenges his argument as VCAL skills strands are not discrete; “where possible and practical” it is “encouraged” that learning outcomes from a number of VCAL skills strands are integrated (VCAA 2014b, p. 4). One strand is not valued over other strands. An expanded diagrammatical representation of the VCAL program is provided in Figure 2.1.
Chapter Two: Introducing VCAL and boundary crossing

The Curriculum structure consists of four study strands that are able to be delivered separately or, preferably, in an integrated program.

Each strand has three qualification levels. Students study at the level of their ability.

The VCAL strands are mutually supportive in developing skills and knowledge that aim to engage young people in education and prepare them for work and life.

Developed from information on the VCAA website: [www.vcaa.vic.edu.au](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au)
Each of the four VCAL skills strands are offered at three qualification (ability) levels: Foundation, Intermediate and Senior (VCAA, 2008a). 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). Students (regardless of their year level) are able to undertake a VCAL qualification level commensurate with their abilities. Subsequently individual students in a VCAL class may be working towards differing qualification levels depending on their independent learning ability.

As the VCAL is a flexible pathway students are able to undertake a mixture of VCAL, VET and VCE subjects depending on their interests and aspirations.

Additionally

[Students 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 2014a, para 4)]

The VCAL program provides opportunities for learning while students are immersed in tasks developed to assist their transition to further education, training and the workplace.
The VCAA directs that educators develop content for their VCAL programs using applied teaching and learning principles. These are listed in Table 2.1.

<table>
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<th>Table 2.1: VCAA principles of applied learning</th>
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<td>5. Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.</td>
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<td>8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context. (VCAA 2011b, p. 1)</td>
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While applied learning pedagogies are optional in other teaching contexts, learning programs developed in VCAL must be developed using constructivist teaching and learning approaches which support student centred learning and situate learning in authentic contexts such as industry or community settings (Blake & Gallagher 2009).

VCAL’s requirement for constructivist teaching and learning challenges the cultural-discursive dimension (Kemmis et al. 2014) of existing pedagogical practice architectures in schools. Subsequently the learning needs of VCAL educators differ from those of their non-VCAL colleagues.

Plows and te Riele (2016) conducted extensive research into understanding professional development undertaken by educators who work in Flexible Learning Programs (FLPs). FLPs provide alternative education pathways for young people at risk of disengaging from school and education. A variation of VCAL, known as community VCAL is recognised as a FLP and educators who worked in a VCAL program were included in their research. Plows and te Riele (2016) argued that FLPs “require educators to work differently from common
approaches adopted in many mainstream settings, and taught in many pre-

service qualifications” (p. iv drawing on Mills & McGregor 2014; Morgan et al. 2014; te Riele 2014). Their recent work continues to reinforce research (see Chapter One) which asserts skills needed by applied learning educators differ from educators who use other pedagogical approaches (Blake & Gallagher 2009; Bottoms, Presson & Johnson 1992; Parker et al. 2015). While Plow and te Riele’s work focused on whether educators in FLPs had access to adequate professional development on flexible learning in this research I am attempting to understand the everyday adult workplace learning experienced by VCAL educators as they work.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) have argued that “learning is ubiquitous in human activity, so that workplace learning is inseparable from working practices” (p. 22). The workplace practices of VCAL educators include using applied learning pedagogies. To provide context surrounding learning of VCAL educators, the following sections describe pedagogical approaches incorporated into the VCAA principles of applied learning. Where relevant I provide examples of teaching and learning practices which can be regarded as counter cultural to those predominately used in the senior years of school.

**Unpacking the VCAA principles of applied learning**

Young people in Victoria undertaking the senior years of school may range in age from 16 – 19 years of age, this age group includes young adults. Consideration of adult learning theory together with youth engagement techniques have been incorporated into the development of the VCAL program (VCAA 2011b; VCAA 2013). This approach has wider support, for example Hattie (1993) argues

> [w]e need to treat Year 11 and 12 students as young adults. A 16 year old today is much more worldly than we were at 16. They have greater demands to be adaptable, worldly and sophisticated while at the same time be kids. The states and countries with the highest retention rates treat year 11 and 12 students as young adults, and remove the sterilities of class rows, bells, compulsion and us and them. They emphasise becoming an adult, and encourage self-control, self regulated learning, and clear performance standards that are understood by students. We need to teach students how to have commitment and how to handle choice. (p. 18)
Both VCAL and adult learning approaches involve learners in planning, goal formulation, plans to reach those goals and reflection on the learning process. Both require the right environment for learning to be successful. Importantly adult, youth development and applied learning require learners to participate in developing their own learning plan and to reflect on the experience of learning in order to identify what they have learnt (Knowles 1990; Jarvis, 2004; VCAA, 2011b).

In the following section the VCAA principles of applied learning (2011b) are used as headings to guide my brief descriptions of pedagogical approaches educators incorporate into their teaching practice as they facilitate VCAL programs. The VCAA principles of applied learning align with, or reflect, Knowles’ (1990) andragogical process model. However, more recent theories which focus on engaging learners and instructional design theories are also clearly evident.

My description of educational theories, which support each principle, is not exhaustive and demonstrates one way of understanding the VCAA principles. Also note that educational theory is not necessarily exclusive to one principle as the principles are mutually supportive.

**Start where learners are at**
The first VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning, “start where learners are at” (p. 1) directs VCAL educators to consider the level of individual student development in order to encourage work at individual student pace and abilities. Gee (2004) argues that if learners are given problems that are greatly mismatched with their abilities the likelihood of being able to apply their learning to other contexts decreases. Gee (2004) advocates that learning tasks need to be “doable” (p. 19). Developing teaching and learning programs at the level of learner ability increases the likelihood of engagement in learning opportunities. Students, regardless of their age or year level, undertake a VCAL qualification level (for example Foundation, Intermediate or Senior) commensurate with their
abilities, (VCAA 2013). Educators may further differentiate learning as necessary (for example see Tomlinson 2014) within each qualification level.

Starting where the learners are at requires educators to scaffold student learning experiences so students become independent learners. For example, Bruner (1966) postulated that a respectful and consistent pedagogical relationship between learner and teacher was an important factor in cognitive development. He also emphasised the importance of communication for cognitive development. Myconos’s (2014) evaluation of a Community VCAL program confirms Bruner’s claims still hold. Myconos included the observation that much relied on stable relationships, as young people respond very negatively to unanticipated changes in relationship with trusted adults ... some students were affected negatively by staff turnover at key points in the 2013 school year. (p. 10)

In a scaffolded approach the teacher gradually introduces the learner to language and related practices which the learner can increasingly use themselves to inform their future thinking and actions. Providing teaching and learning opportunities commensurate with students’ current ability and interests also draws on Vygotsky’s (1978) “zone of proximal development”. The role of the VCAL educator is to support student learning as VCAL learners advance in cognitive ability from a present level of independent learning ability (where they are at) to their learning ability with teacher support. In incorporating this principle into their teaching practice the challenge for VCAL educators is to guide learning, often simultaneously, at three ability or qualification levels in the one class. VCAL educators do not necessarily simply adapt similar content to each qualification level. Learning content may differ between qualification levels and between students depending on their interests and needs.

Rogoff (1990) built on the work of Vygotsky emphasising that in order to make connection between what students know and the “new information to be learned” (p. viii), “guided participation” with teacher or mentor was necessary for learner development (p. 8). This requires educators to build pedagogical
relationships with students to identify their capabilities and interests. The approach in VCAL of considering the ability and interests of the learner challenges existing practice architectures in schools. It is counter to other senior years learning which is organised around “standardised entry and progression” (Bentley 2002, p. 5) and learning content is determined by a central controlling organisation, which, in Victoria, is the VCAA.

Teaching and learning strategies which support this principle include one on one discussions with students, speaking with students’ previous teachers and reading student files. Educator skills needed to support this principle include flexibility, empathy, understanding of issues affecting youth and good listening and communication skills.

**Negotiate the curriculum...**
The second VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning is “[n]egotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum” (p. 1). This principle directs VCAL educators to develop learning programs for their students by understanding and building on the interests, strengths and abilities of their students (VCAA 2014b). This approach allows the learners to experience learning as “active agents” rather than “passive recipients” (Gee 2004, p. 17) and draws on adult learning theory in which adults are seen as self-directed learners (Knowles 1990). Involving learners in planning their learning also promotes engagement and the possibility of making future learning experiences enjoyable. Dewy (1938) argues a challenge and responsibility of educators is to engage the student in learning activities which are “enjoyable since they promote having desirable future experiences” (p. 16).

In order to negotiate curriculum and teach VCAL, respectful pedagogical relationships between learners and the educator/facilitator need to be established (VCAA 2011b). The value of supportive, mutually sustainable relationships between learner and mentor is acknowledged as important to learning (Fenwick & Tennant 2004; Knowles 1990; Rogoff 1990).
Alexander (2005), Head of the Social Science Faculty at A. B. Paterson College in Queensland Australia has a particular interest in negotiating the curriculum with students. He has experimented in his own classes and observed how curriculum is enacted in other schools. Alexander argues that negotiating the History curriculum provided a range of challenges and benefits. Among the challenges was a contradiction that in our society where change is inevitable, and innovation and adaptability of citizens demanded by changing policies, educators were limited in their implementation of innovation by the accountability and performativity requirements of both school and government policies. He also makes reference to another contradiction that

students are generally not trusted with making decisions about their own learning, when paradoxically ... this is what we expect students to do as they mature and become life-long learners. (p. 36)

Alexander (2005) acknowledges educators are limited in the potential to negotiate curriculum in discipline areas such as History as it “has a tradition of being based very largely around students knowing masses of events, names and dates” (p. 37). On the other hand he argues that negotiating curriculum empowers students by giving them “some control over their own learning” (p. 36). At the same time he recognizes that the negotiation approach differs “to the way history is taught in most schools” (p. 36).

Boomer (1985) had previously argued in his account of “oppositional reading of teaching” (p. 7) that negotiating curriculum content with students means “teaching against the grain” of dominant educational practices. He asserts that “schools are shaped by what society expects ... [and] by what is ultimately valued and assessed”. One reason he advances for this view is the existence of “a ruling hegemony generated out of the economic interests of the wealthy class ... [and] imposed on the lower orders ... [to] determine local relationships (p. 8).

Teaching and learning strategies used by educators to support this principle include development of safe collaborative learning environments and “activities
which encourage planning, developing and working to timelines” (VCAA 2014b, p. 2). Educator skills needed to enact this principle are an ability to negotiate well, actively listen, communicate effectively and develop flexible teaching plans.

**Share knowledge...**

The third VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning is “[s]hare knowledge [r]ecognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment” (p. 1). This approach acknowledges the value of learners’ experience (Marsick & Watkins 1990; Knowles 1990) and the social nature of learning (Dewey 1938; Kalantzis & Cope 2012; Lave & Wegner 1991). This principle requires VCAL educators to draw on constructivist theories of teaching and learning in their pedagogic practice in order to support students in creating their own knowledge from learning in authentic settings. The role of the educator in these learning communities is to create opportunities for students to learn in real contexts and provide guidance and support to student learning (Mayer 1999).

While Mayer (1999) highlights that “learners can construct meaning from well-designed direct instruction” (p. 143), inquiry based learning approaches used in VCAL support collaborative learning and provide a platform for discussion, negotiation and communication between group members. Student learning results from “interact[ion]”, “common endeavour”, “common resources” and shared “identities as members of the group” (Barton & Tusting 2005, p. 2).

Billett (2001) argues that problem solving undertaken in a collaborative environment is

more important for individuals’ construction of knowledge than the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another through direct teaching. (p. 19 citing Collins et al. 1989; Rogoff 1990, 1995; Resnick et al. 1997)

However, reservations are also expressed in literature about the value of collaboration. Lester (1992) encourages questioning and critique of attempts to change education rather than mindlessly embracing new constructivist
approaches. She says that simplistic approaches to collaborative learning are not
effective and make

a distinction between learning that is genuinely collaborative and learning that
seems by its label to require collaboration, but show[ing] few, if any, signs of
being so. (p. 199)

Jowers, Gaved, Elliott-Cirigottis, Dallison, Rohead and Craig (2016) completed a
case study of collaborative learning involving undergraduate design students and
expressed reservations about the value of collaboration. They argue that simply
communicating in groups is not collaboration. Their view is that “effective
collaboration depends on sharing expertise through dialogue” (p. 1). They argue
dialogue involves interpretation, negotiation, managing relationships and
dealing with any resultant contradictions or barriers.

Incorporating collaborative teaching and learning strategies into teaching
practice is time consuming and subsequently educators may be reluctant to use
the approach in their teaching (Marsh 2008). Additionally, Bielaczyc and Collins
(1999) believe constructivist learning communities are a “radical departure”
from the more widespread “theory of learning and knowledge underlying
schooling (p. 290). They acknowledge that teaching and learning approaches,
which embrace the concept of learning communities, are
directly opposed to the approaches found in most schools, where learning is
viewed as an individual pursuit and the goal is to transmit the textbook’s and
teacher’s knowledge to students. (p. 290)

Teaching and learning strategies which support this principle include “small and
large group activities where students learn the importance of collaborative
involvement” (VCAA 2014b, p. 2), negotiating curriculum, learning in authentic
contexts and group projects. Educator skills which support this principle are good
listening and facilitation skills along with a willingness to learn from students.

Connect with communities and real life experiences
The fourth VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning “connect with

communities and real life experiences” (p. 1) emphasises the importance of an
authentic environment for learning, which is supported by a range of theorists (for example Dewey 1938; Billett 2001; Fenwick & Tennant 2004; Gonzci, 2004; Lave & Wenger 1991; Merriam 2004).

Gonzci (2004) unequivocally maintains “learning is developed through doing, through acting in the world” (p. 30). In Van Noy, James and Bedley’s (2016) review of informal literature they use a range of work (Dean & Murk 1998; Kolb 1984; Roessger 2012) to express a similar view and assert that an important concept in “experiential learning is that the learner is active and learns through actions rather than by observing” (p. 12).

Duch, Groh and Allen (2001) argue there is greater likelihood that concepts practiced in an authentic context are retained and able to be applied elsewhere (p. 7). Subsequently a learner’s ability to apply learning is optimised if the learning environment is adapted to contemporary circumstances rather than remaining static and reflecting previous generations (Dewey 1938). In the VCAL program learning is intended to occur within a range and variety of, including temporal, communities of practice settings so students experience interaction embedded across environments in which they live. This is because activity situated within experiential contexts promotes “learning ... in many settings beyond the school classroom and is not, necessarily, associated with teaching” (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin 2007, p. 3 citing Young 1998, p. 179; see also Bentley 2002).

Structured workplace or community learning reinforces the social, negotiated and collaborative nature of applied learning regardless of whether the young person is participating in legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991), acting as an apprentice (Wenger 1998) or co-participating as a bricoleur (Denzin and Lincoln 1998). A range of educational theorists argue the importance of incorporating appropriate and meaningful experience into learning (Berlack & Berlack 1981; Dewey 1938; Foley 2004; Freire & Macedo 1996; Kolb 1984; Marsick & Watkins 1990; Pratt 1993; Tripp 1987).
Student learning undertaken in workplaces and authentic settings requires students to cross boundaries and mediate between different forms of expertise and the demands of different contexts ... in this sense, [student] boundary crossing involves negotiating different zones of proximal development. (Griffiths & Guile 2003, p. 61)

Song and Bonk’s (2016) review of literature reveal varied perceptions of where informal learning takes place. For example, some such as Bull et al. (2008) believed that the location of the learning determined its form. Bull et al. therefore perceived learning outside school, even if undertaken in an accredited course of study, was informal learning (Song & Bonk 2016).

More challenging for VCAL educators is that utilising settings outside schools for learning is counter cultural to the dominant paradigm of learning where learning tends “to be designed for delivery in traditional classroom settings” (Masters 2015, para 7). Masters (2015) as Chief Executive of the ACER has argued that current curricula are often dominated by substantial bodies of factual and procedural knowledge, at a time when it is increasingly important that students can apply deep understandings of key disciplinary concepts and principles to real-world problems. (para 7)

Masters (2015) goes on to argue that dominant approaches to learning currently used in the senior years of secondary school, which value individualised achievement, are contradictory to the nature of workplaces in the 21st century which are “increasingly organised around teamwork and are requiring good interpersonal and communication skills” (para 7).

Learning contexts which support connecting to communities and real life experiences include settings where students are able to interact with the wider population such as: home, hobby groups, sporting groups, school, community partnership settings and work environments. Educator skills needed to support this principle include good networking, people, project management, negotiation
and communication skills along with an ability to recognise learning opportunities in a wide range of contexts.

**Build resilience, confidence and self worth...**
The fifth VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning “[b]uild resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person” (p. 1) is intended to support “personal development and growth” (VCAA 2014b, p. 4). Achieving the aims of this principle depends greatly on educators effectively getting to know students (the first VCAA principle of applied learning) and negotiating the curriculum (the second VCAA principle of applied learning). Curriculum that engages young people can result in “positive educational outcomes” and “encourage[s] personal development and growth” which in turn can minimise “risk factors” (VCAA 2014b, p. 4) relating to either behaviours or likelihood of completing school and transitioning into further education, training and the workplace.

Project based learning (discussed under ‘integrate learning’, the sixth VCAA principle of applied learning) is encouraged in VCAL (VALA 2013). In their research into using applied learning projects to teach social entrepreneurship Chang, Benamraoui and Rieple (2014) described benefits, in addition to increased social capital, to students. They explained that a project approach to learning about social entrepreneurship had advantages over classroom instruction in creating resilience and confidence. This is because the personal risk to the students is minimised. For example if a project such as a fundraiser is successful then a charity, receives funds. If it were not successful, while the charity would not benefit, neither would the students lose personally. Subsequently “unsuccessful value creation is not penalised as it would be in the real world” (p. 460). Chang, Benamraoui and Rieple (2014) explain that student assessment was not based on whether the project made money or not, instead “assessment was based on a reflective log of their learning journey” (p. 460). Subsequently students could take risks, be creative and experience consequences of decision making in a benign and contained environment.
Structured, supervised learning in real contexts provides a safe simplified learning environment in which “risks and dangers [are] greatly mitigated” (Gee 2004, p. 20-21). This increases the likelihood the learning experience will be positive and students will feel a sense of achievement and pride and seek further learning opportunities.

Victorian schools are encouraged to run whole school programs to build student resilience and wellbeing (Cahill, Beadle, Farrelly, Forster & Smith 2014). These programs are frequently standalone packages, rather than integrated in all teaching and learning. VCAL teaching and learning tacitly promotes and nurtures self-worth and resilience as research has shown that students who undertake applied learning will have “improved self-esteem and confidence”, “motivation” and “commitment” (VCAA 2011b, p. 2). Teaching and learning strategies which support this principle include VCAL students working in authentic contexts, working as mentors to younger students and designing solutions to problems. Educators are encouraged to recognise and value “student achievement and student contributions” both formally and informally (VCAA 2014b, p. 4).

However as Myconos (2014) found in his evaluation of a community VCAL program, teaching strategies designed to promote resilience are not necessarily enough when dealing with students who have “experienced severe hardship” (p. 8). He stresses the “importance of ongoing specialist wellbeing support for students” (p. 8) to support their welfare and engagement in a VCAL program. He described how teaching staff had to reconcile their existing practice architectures of classroom management and engagement with practices more suitable for this particular cohort teachers sometimes spoke of the challenges associated with building positive relations with students. As the setting lends itself to a level of intimacy not usually associated with schooling, teachers grappled with a kind of reticence to be open or convivial. This reticence was partly a conditioned outcome of a mainstream teaching culture favouring arms-length engagement, premised on the more-or-less unquestioned authority of the teacher. (p. 9)
Educator skills needed to support this principle include a good understanding of young people and related contemporary issues, empathy, good communication skills and the ability to be non-judgemental.

Integrate learning – the whole task and the whole person...
The sixth VCAA (2014e) principle of applied learning supports the “integration of skills that often occurs outside the school curriculum, in everyday life and the workplace” (para one). Projects with their naturally associated challenges or problems and the requirement of research enquiry are encouraged in VCAL as they provide the opportunity for holistic and meaningful learning relevant to the real world (Dewey 1938; Diffily & Sassman 2002; Duda 2014; VALA 2013). Projects and problems necessitate enquiry to “identify the information needed for a particular application” (Duch, Groh & Allen 2001, p. 7).

From an extensive review of literature on project based learning Kokotsaki, Menzies and Wiggins (2016) provided a more detailed summary of the benefits of project based learning grounded in student learning centred inquiry based pedagogies. Project based learning clearly aligns with the intentions of VCAL and specifically with the VCAA principles of applied learning

Project based learning (PBL) is a student-centred form of instruction which is based on three constructivist principles: learning is context-specific, learners are involved actively in the learning process and they achieve their goals through social interactions and the sharing of knowledge and understanding. (Kokotsaki, Menzies & Wiggins 2016, p. 1–2)

As they develop project based VCAL programs educators tacitly incorporate other VCAA applied learning principles. Project based learning connects students with communities and real life experiences (the fourth VCAA principles of applied learning) and builds resilience (the fifth VCAA principle of applied learning – see previous discussion). Elements of adult learning theory are also evident because projects require students to be agents in their own learning to develop goals, plan, organise their resources and make decisions.
Project based learning provides opportunities for VCAL students to meet a selection of learning outcomes across several (or all) skills strands. For example, organising a fund-raising barbecue may meet learning outcomes from the Numeracy Skills Strand and the Personal Development Skills Strand. While effective, developing integrated programs is not necessarily as efficient as discrete program planning given the additional logistic requirements. Additionally time is required for meeting with educators of other VCAL skills strands and community partners to coordinate program development and negotiate learning outcomes.

However, project based learning is not normally used as a teaching approach in the senior years of schooling and are more “typically undertaken by early childhood and primary school children” (Marsh 2008, p. 174). Stephenson and Galloway (2004) have observed that the interest in incorporating problem based learning into vocationally related study challenges “[c]onventional forms of teaching [which] use problems to teach how to apply knowledge after it has been learned” (p. 265 citing Woods 1994). In VCAL and other programs that utilise problem based learning the problem “drive[s] the learning” (p. 265 citing Woods 1994). However, Billett (2003) has argued problem based learning on its own, without situating the problem in an authentic context, such as a project, is “fanciful and flawed” (p. 8). He states this is because “transferable meta-skills” cannot be developed in nonspecific contexts (p. 8).

Masters (2015) asserts that “[s]chool subjects tend to be taught in isolation from each other” (para 7). Subsequently projects which integrate learning from several knowledge domains are counter to the dominant paradigm of teaching and learning. Masters believes however that the reality of life and “the nature of work [is] becoming increasingly cross-disciplinary” (para 7) and integrated learning approaches are more appropriate as preparation for life in the 21st century.
In their examination of project based learning literature Kokotsaki, Menzies and Wiggins (2016) caution that “successful implementation of PBL [project based learning] in the classroom relies on the teacher’s ability to effectively scaffold students’ learning, motivate, support and guide them along the way” (p. 6). Educators need to draw on a variety of skills to support this principle, for example project management skills, the ability to identify safety risks, communicate, supervise, delegate, coordinate and negotiate.

**Promote diversity of learning styles and methods...**
The seventh VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning is

> [p]romote 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. (p. 1)

This principle recognises individuals differ in the way their learning occurs. For example, Gardner’s (2011) theory of multiple intelligences argues that learning styles include verbal, kinaesthetic, musical, logical, self-awareness and interaction with others. However, students can also be strong learners in more than one of the intelligences. Kolb (1984) argued the way learners process information is reflective of their learning style. At the same time he believes learning involves a number of sensory experiences such as “experience, perception, cognition and behaviour” (p. 21).

Teaching and learning approaches that support this principle include incorporating a variety of teaching strategies into experiential learning activities to maximise likelihood of learning occurring. For example, students who are strong in linguistic intelligence (which focuses on words and language) could be offered oral presentations or written responses to tasks (VCAA 2011a). On the other hand, students who are strong in bodily kinaesthetic intelligence (learning through movement of the body) might benefit from assessment options involving construction or physical demonstrations. Visual learners would benefit from the option to creatively respond to assessment tasks in the form of design or interpretation.
Accommodating diverse learning styles by the use of flexible assessment approaches challenges the dominant assessment method in the senior years of school, which is standardised written exams. This is explained further in the next section.

In order to cater for diverse learning styles educators require ability to recognise and differentiate the curriculum. This includes planning extra content to cater for differing learning styles and offering assessment options to suit individual student learning abilities.

Assess appropriately...
The eighth VCAA (2011b) principle of applied learning is “[a]ssess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context” (p. 1). In other VCAL documentation the VCAA (2014f) reinforces that “[a]ssessment in the VCAL should focus on integrated projects/activities” (p. 3). Kokotsaki, Menzies and Wiggins (2016) considered a range of literature on project based learning. They subsequently recommended that assessment of project based learning should include “an emphasis on reflection, self and peer evaluation” (p. 8). This supports Ramsden’s (2002) argument that assessment methods should be relevant “to the aims and objectives it is supposed to test” (p. 192).

Established assessment methods value students’ ability to store “generalizable forms of knowledge” and “reproduce the knowledge under exam conditions” (Blake & Gallagher 2009, p. 62). This dominant assessment approach in the senior years of school “tend[s] to provide information about student achievement” (Masters 2015, para 7) that is, the degree to which the student is able to reproduce knowledge. The dominant assessment approach results in a score which “regulates entry to university by converting achievement in subjects studied into a common scale and a single university entrance score” (Yates 2006, p. 287).

However, an exam style assessment score is not regarded as an “appropriate
assessment” in VCAL (VCAA 2010, p. 5). In VCAL, assessment is competency based, conducted within an authentic context and frequently within a learning community of other students. Competency based assessment requires learners to demonstrate their ability to complete a certain action and for the assessor to be confident the action can be repeated. Demonstration that a student has met a learning outcome is marked as “satisfactory” or “not satisfactory” rather than the decision further refined as to the degree of proficiency. Schwartzman and Henry (2009), in considering Blake and Gallagher’s (2009) commentary on the introduction of the VCAL program, observed that

> [f]or teachers who are trained in traditional assessment strategies, it can be difficult to imagine how a real-world experience could translate to assessment focused on test scores. (p. 16)

The use of learning communities also challenges the practice of schools where assessment is undertaken individually, in isolation from resources such as “students, books, or computers” (Bielaczyc & Collins 1999, p. 290). The approach in VCAL responds to Masters (2015) criticism that traditional assessment practice architectures do not meet the needs of 21st century employers who are “seeking better information about students’ abilities to work in teams, use technology, communicate, solve problems and learn on the job” (para 7).

As VCAL is a competency based program, assessment is the learning activity. Success requires the student to be able to generate evidence they have achieved the learning outcome on more than one occasion in differing contexts (VCAA 2010). Subsequently learning and assessment are simultaneous in VCAL.

Educator skills needed to support this principle include flexibility, understanding of the VCAL principles of assessment and an ability to identify and respond to the learning styles of students.

**Summarising the counter cultural nature of applied learning**

This next section briefly summarises the previous discussion of how teaching and learning approaches inherent in the VCAA principles of applied learning which
characterise VCAL can be regarded as counter cultural to dominant paradigms of teaching and learning in the senior school years.

- While VCAL curriculum has structure in the form of required learning outcomes for each of the Skills Strands, the content of how those learning outcomes are met is negotiated with the students, not determined by a centralised agency (eg the VCAA). VCAL is able to cater for the abilities of individual students, and students enter the program at their ability level. There is no pre-requisite study or preparation and learning commences at the level of the learner, not the level of standardised curriculum (VCAA 2014f; VCAA 2016).

Negotiating curriculum is counter to dominant education practices (Boomer 1985) in other Victorian senior years programs where curriculum is determined and controlled by a central agency (VCAA 2016) and potential to negotiate curriculum is limited (Alexander 2005).

- The VCAL program is informed by theories of adult learning and youth development. Knowledge is constructed in collaborative environments, including group work with peers and can take place in range of social, work and community settings where students interact with the wider population such as: home, hobby groups, sporting groups, school, community partnership settings and work environments (VCAA 2014b; VCAA 2014e).

Adult learning theory along with constructivist teaching and learning approaches used in VCAL are counter to the more dominant practice of transmissive teaching learning approaches used in education (Bielaczyc & Collins 1999; Hattie 1993; Masters 2015).

- Learning and assessment occur simultaneously in VCAL. Both learning and assessment occur in authentic contexts through tasks and activities rather than classroom testing and exams (VCAA 2014b; VCAA 2014e; VCAA 2014f).
Using authentic contexts for learning is counter to dominant teaching and learning approaches in other senior years’ programs where learning is assessed individually through standardised exams conducted away from the context in which it will be used (Masters 2015; VCAA 2016).

- Developing VCAL programs as projects which incorporate learning outcomes from several skills strands is encouraged (VCAA 2014b; VCAA 2014e; VCAA 2014f).

*Integrating curriculum is counter to dominant teaching and learning approaches in other Victorian senior years’ programs where subject areas are taught discretely (Masters 2015).*

Whitby (2007) noted that many educators have worked hard to “make improvements to schooling” but are hampered by existing practice architectures which embrace “mass schooling” and “teaching – controlled learning” where students are grouped by age, not ability and their learning contexts are uniform classrooms (p. 2). VCAL teaching and learning approaches are student learning centred, grouped by student ability, and learning contexts are varied and adapted to learning outcomes. Bentley (2002) has argued that innovative teachers frequently struggle “against the organizational and pedagogical constraints of the schooling framework” (p. 7). I suggest the same can be said about VCAL educators as they attempt to learn and enact teaching and learning approaches, integral to the VCAL program, which challenge existing practice architectures.

**Critical reflection – transforming student experience into knowledge**

Critical reflection is a key component in providing VCAL students with the intellectual ability to transform learning experiences (for example see VCAA 2010; VCAA 2014b). The use of critical reflection prompts and promotes learning from experiences (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1996; Hoyrup & Elkjaer, 2006;
Mezirow (1990) and increases the likelihood of learning from experience being applied in other contexts.

Mezirow (1990) argued “to make sense of an experience; we make an interpretation of it” (p. 1), while Schön’s (1995) work examined the process of both reflection during action and reflection after action. In research regarding the effectiveness of “learning-by-doing as an approach to teaching social entrepreneurship” Chang, Benamraoui and Rieple (2014) interrogated students’ weekly reflections to identify evidence of learning. They use the terms “priori (known without prior experience) and posteriori knowledge (gained by experience)” (p. 462) as categories to demarcate what learning occurred and identify the circumstances that facilitated this learning. In short, these terms were employed to describe the ways in which students constructed learning through experiences. Through their analysis of student reflections Chang, Benamraoui and Rieple (2014) synthesised knowledge about the strategies that supported student learning in this context. For VCAL educators, understanding the knowledge development of their students provides information regarding the first VCAA principle of applied learning; know where the students are at.

Critical reflection after VCAL projects or activities are completed is crucial if students are “to understand the significance of what [they] see, hear and touch” (Dewey 1938, p. 79 italics in original. See also Schank, Berman & Kimberli 1999). Reflection is the process by which students can construct learning and meaning from problems experienced during the completion of projects. Ideally, the resultant meaning and learning will inform the learners’ future behaviours, actions or thinking in contexts different to those in which the original learning experience occurred. This process can also result in meta-learning, for example critical thinking, resilience and problem solving.

The emphasis on student reflection, particularly within an experiential applied learning process, is supported by Ash and Clayton (2009 p. 25). Yet, as Brooks, Harris and Clayton (2010) note, reflection needs to be well designed in order to
assist in building student “capacity to understand and direct their own learning process” (p. 58). This reinforces the earlier work of Boud and Walker (1993) who, while proponents of learning by experience, also recognised there are barriers to learning from reflection on experience. Their own model of the learning process incorporated three stages: preparation, experience and reflection (p. 80). After lengthy reflection on their model and consideration of the composition of barriers they concluded barriers to learning can occur at any stage. Their work also determined that barriers to learning from experience included a range of internal factors, for example the learner’s previous negative learning experiences and external factors, for example an unsupportive learning environment (p. 79). Regardless of whether the barrier was internal or external, they concluded that “barriers to learning revolve around the individual learners, even when key factors involved appear to be social or cultural” (p. 81).

Subsequently VCAL educators require skills to adroitly support student reflection in making connections between “theory and practice” along with past and new knowledge (Brooks, Harris & Clayton 2010, p. 58). In doing so, they nurture development of “higher-order reasoning and critical thinking skills” which are integral to the employability skills which provide the basis for the work related skills units (VCAA 2014b).

**Boundary crossing in VCAL**

The VCAL program provides opportunities for students to learn skills and develop attributes in order to progress (or boundary cross) into their unknown future. At the same time, the nature of the work of VCAL educators is wide ranging and regularly requires them to act and move into spaces which may be unfamiliar; for example as they begin to teach in the VCAL program, use applied learning teaching and learning approaches and develop curriculum content. Educators are also required to identify, form and maintain partnerships with industry and community organisations to develop programs that support student experiential learning. Subsequently there is a natural correlation between the concept of
boundary crossing and the professional work of VCAL educators. While the use of boundary crossing theory can also provide a vehicle for discussing the related development of VCAL students (see for example Blake 2009; Bronkhorst & Akkerman 2016), in this thesis it provides language for discussion of the everyday learning of VCAL educators in their professional work.

**Boundary crossing as a theoretical lens**

Precedents exist for using the notion of boundary crossing to discuss the nature of the work of teachers and educators. Beauchamp and Thomas (2011) have investigated and described the identity shift that occurs in the boundary space between finishing a teacher preparation course and completing the initial months of teacher practice (p. 6). In their study boundary crossing described transformation from a novice teacher to one admitted into membership of the school’s teacher community. Some sociocultural differences had been negotiated others remained, while new ones had been identified.

Flynn, Pillay and Watters (2016) used boundary crossing to describe the impact of partnerships between industry and school on the school to work transitions of students who undertook “vocational education opportunities” in the “Gateway to Industry Schools Program” in Queensland, Australia (p. 309). They used the concept of boundary crossing to describe both how stakeholders learned to work together and how the program developed student ability to make the transition from school to the workplace (p. 312).

Hobbs (2014) has employed the term to describe the phenomenon of teachers required to teach “subjects for which [they] hold no formal qualification in either the discipline or teaching method” (p. 7). Her work centres on the educator experience of “transformation of identity and practices” (p. 13). In her research, teachers relate their experiences of teaching out of the field in which they are qualified. However the teachers are not necessarily challenged to use unfamiliar pedagogical teaching and learning approaches.
Akkerman and Bakker (2011) suggest that boundary crossing theory was first introduced by Suchman to denote how professionals in their work may need to “enter onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore unqualified” (p. 134). Suchman (1994) used the term boundary in her discussion of “networking as working relations of technology production and use” (p. 21). She described her “preoccupation with social boundaries” (p. 23) as the catalyst that caused her to reflect on bound-ed nature of the different social worlds and networks of her workplace and her desire to construct “social relations” in the form of “artifacts” [sic] which enabled differences between the worlds to be transversed (p. 25). However Star (1989; see also Star & Griesemer 1989) had already been theorising for some years about how to develop effective working and collaboration among different groups of people engaged in the same enterprise. Star introduced the notion of boundary objects to describe how effective working (boundary crossing) might be achieved between the different groups.

**Boundaries affecting VCAL educators**

In this thesis the boundaries across which VCAL educators move have several characteristics. Firstly they are aligned with Akkermann and Bakker’s (2011) description of boundaries as spaces separating sites which are “relevant to one another” (p. 133) and Suchman’s (1994) description of a boundary as the space between the familiar and unfamiliar (see also Edwards & Fowler 2007, p. 108). Both of these factors are evident in the professional teaching experiences of VCAL educators. Following are some examples of boundary spaces that exhibit cultural difference when teaching in VCAL:

- The differences between curriculum familiar to the educator and VCAL curriculum that is not.
- The difference between the dominant paradigm of transmissive teaching approaches and student learning centred constructivist teaching approaches required by the nature of the VCAL curriculum.
• A classroom and the diversity of locations that VCAL educators must move in order to negotiate and develop curriculum with organisation entities outside the classroom.

• The regard in which vocationally related education such as VCAL are held compared to the regard given to learning programs considered more academic, in that they can directly lead to university study.

Each of these examples describe sites that share similarities but differ in terms of their sociocultural contexts and cultures. As Akkerman & Bakker (2011) argue, these sociocultural differences create boundaries.

The movement of VCAL educators as they negotiate the sociocultural differences between differing curricula provides an example of boundary or “border crossing” (Edwards & Fowler 2007, p. 108). Another example of boundary crossing is VCAL teachers learning to use applied learning pedagogies in place of transmissive teaching approaches. Negotiation with stakeholders, and the formation of learning partnerships (similar to Flynn, Pillay & Watters’ 2016 study) in order to develop VCAL learning programs is also an example of boundary crossing. However, the necessity for both cognitive and physical boundary crossing, such as a requirement to plan learning programs in authentic contexts of community or industry, can challenge VCAL educators’ existing conceptions of teacher practice. What is of interest to me is how they manage the challenges associated with the process and what artefacts, or boundary crossing objects, assist them to do so.

It is well documented that future action and thinking is impacted by past experiences and environments (Berlack & Berlack 1981; Freire & Macedo 1996; Goodson 1991; McLaren 1989; Thomas 1995; Tripp 1987). In moving across existing boundaries of understanding and professional knowledge, the sociocultural constructs (Akkerman & Bakker 2011) of VCAL educators are challenged and redefined by new experiences and observations. Greater understanding of the challenges, successes and learning experiences of
practicing VCAL educators can inform preparation and support for future VCAL educators and ease their boundary crossing.

Boundary crossing theory enables a shared language to describe learning experiences of VCAL educators, especially when a “sense of familiarity” with their existing or previous teaching and learning approaches is shaken or disrupted. In these circumstances learning is frequently “intensified” (Wenger 1998, p. 98). This may occur when they work with young people who think or behave differently to themselves. VCAL has a student cohort with a concentration of challenging behaviours (Blake 2009) and who may have a range of risk factors due to “significant hardship” (Myconos 2014, p. 6). The behaviour of students may challenge the educator’s own values and worldview. To form pedagogical relationships with students, educators need to balance their own views with respect for student views.

The nature of pedagogical relationships between students and their teachers, which are encouraged in VCAL, challenge the transmissive style of teaching and learning relationships that Freire (1993) has argued are dominant in schools and referred to as “narrative” in nature (p. 71; see also Bentley 2002; Whitby 2007). In narrative relationships Freire argues the teacher is a “narrating subject” and the students are “patient, listening objects” (p. 71). This contrasts with the relationships espoused in VCAL where the relationship between teacher and students is built on educators’ knowledge of student interests, abilities and learning styles from which the program content is negotiated. Knowledge held by the student is valued and shared. Educators provide support commensurate with student abilities and the qualification level being studied (VCAA 2006).

Using the lens of boundary crossing to explore the workplace of VCAL educators does not imply that other educators do not encounter or cross boundaries. Schools, like many other organisations, “contain boundaries that are being constantly negotiated” (Hobbs 2014, p. 7). Boundaries of power and control can be found in the relationships between educators, students and parents, among
staff and discipline hierarchies, administration systems, subject areas and schools’ socio-economic status. These represent some of the “structures and networks” within which staff and students are embedded (Hallinan 2000, p. ix) and reflect the “practice architectures” to which Kemmis et al. refer (2014). However the impact on VCAL educators is similar to the organisation in which Suchman (1994) worked

boundaries that ... define ... working relations are realized through institutionalized arrangements and practices crafted precisely to their reproduction, such that crossing boundaries means entering into a process of profound and uncomfortable social change. (p. 25)

These added boundaries provide another layer of complexity as VCAL educators manage problems, differences, entrenched ways of working, discontinuities, contradictions and cultural differences when moving between teaching programs.

**Learning to teach across boundaries**

Boundaries are a space which connect “two or more sites” that are “relevant to one another in a particular way” (Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 133). AusVELS, VCAL or VCE are “relevant to one another” as curricula offered within schools. As educators start teaching in the VCAL program they may identify differences from their past teaching and learning practices. Griffiths and Guile (2003) liken this learning space to a “zone of proximal development” (p. 61). This explanation works well in considering the boundary crossing of VCAL educators who are “undertaking actions which are embedded in activities whose object and motive is not learning as such” (Griffiths & Guile 2003, p. 61), for example as they negotiate partnerships with community and industry stakeholders. In this sense VCAL educators’ development may be “horizontal” when they are required to “mediate between different forms of expertise” rather than being able to solely draw on their existing knowledge and teaching skills (Griffiths & Guile 2003, p. 61).
New boundaries new learning possibilities

Kerosuo and Engeström (2003) indicate that learning “at work is mainly about assuming the collectively-based routines” (p. 345). This is not necessarily the case for learning in the teacher workplace. As argued by Hammerness, Darling-Hammond, Bransford, Berliner, Cochran-Smith, McDonald & Zeichner (2005) while some facets of teaching may be regarded as repetitive “what teachers do will still be influenced by changing student needs and unexpected classroom events” (p. 359). For VCAL educators there are two other ways in which Kerosuo and Engeström’s (2003) description of learning at work can be challenged.

Firstly, VCAL program development is not based on an annual collective routine within familiar, previously navigated boundaries. Each year VCAL educators must seek, establish or maintain networking opportunities and partnerships in order to develop meaningful programs and projects for their students. Kerosuo and Engeström (2003) indicate that boundaries manifest as “encount[ering] a problem or dilemma” (p. 347). Each year new problems and dilemmas arise for individual VCAL educators in the development of appropriate curriculum or maintenance and establishment of community and industry partnerships. Subsequently VCAL educators regularly push against boundaries to develop learning programs.

The second way in which learning at work for VCAL educators is not about assuming a collectively based routine is that the pedagogical practice of VCAL educators disrupts existing dominant pedagogical architectures within the wider school setting. Dewey (1938) believes learning occurs when reflecting on a discontinuity or when change is desired. As VCAL educators routinely encounter, and are required to engage with, the unfamiliar in order to create new learning possibilities and contexts for their students within their teaching space, opportunities and necessity for their own reflective learning are frequent.
Boundaries can become Barriers

For some VCAL educators the boundaries in VCAL have the potential to become barriers to effective teaching and learning practice. For example, educators are frequently required to work across institutional settings to formulate and negotiate curriculum content with industry and community partners. This is particularly the case for the Work Related Skills Strand and Personal Development Skills Strand components of the VCAL. Partnerships with organisations, for example an aged care facility, provide potential for VCAL programs which involve students in organising events, exploring historical perspectives and developing civic mindedness. These tasks have the potential to contribute to meeting learning outcomes in either, or both, of the two strands.

However, establishing such partnerships requires VCAL educators to employ network and negotiation skills in order to identify suitable organisations with whom to develop meaningful curriculum and in which students might work. VCAL educators must negotiate and develop curriculum content that both benefits students and contributes in a tangible way to the needs of the partner organisation. Identifying and developing partnerships is an ongoing process as activities cannot necessarily be repeated year after year in the same settings. Subsequently educators are required to participate and collaborate across and within a range of fields to ensure the success of the program.

Merton (1936) found that for all intended consequences of social action there are also unintended, unanticipated or unforeseen consequences (see also Bauman 1998; Winston 2010). This appears to be evident in the VCAL program. For VCAL educators the curriculum presents new opportunities for their own learning and the necessity for learning to be negotiated with students and partners for effective delivery of the program. The negotiation process becomes an example of boundary crossing as educators move from a comfortable knowledge or teaching practice zone and into an uncomfortable teaching practice zone where held constructs of teaching and learning are challenged and
redefined by new experiences or observations (Wenger 2000). Examples of barriers that VCAL educators may encounter are poor perceptions of vocationally orientated education (detailed in Chapter One) or established individually held meaning schemes (Mezirow 1990 – discussed in Chapter Three).

Wenger (2000) acknowledges that “[boundaries] can create divisions and be a source of separation, fragmentation, disconnection, and misunderstanding” (p. 233). This is not surprising as while boundaries may shift they do not disappear; other boundaries are frequently created (Bauman 2001; Edwards & Fowler 2007). These boundaries can be in addition to the social constructs, practice architectures and institution dynamics within education providers as a result of education policy and reform (Hallinan 2000; Kemmis et al. 2014).

**Boundary crossing objects**

Within fields there are differing characteristics of language and identity (Barton & Tusting 2005; Hobbs 2014). Boundary objects permit meaning to be shared, or translated across different fields, groups, or “communities of knowledge or practice” (Fox 2011, p. 70; see also Wenger 1998). Although the nature of boundary objects is nebulous (Akkerman & Bakker 2011; Jewson 2007; Star 1989; Star & Griesemer 1989), there is agreement the nature of boundary objects enables working across two or more sites. When Star (1989) first introduced the concept she described boundary objects as

> both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites. (p. 46)

Work by Star and Griesemer (1989) provides an early example of the application of boundary objects. They analysed how cooperation was achieved among a diverse group of professional and amateur people associated with a natural history museum setting. The individuals represented differing sociocultural understandings and perspectives of the work that was being done in collecting specimens. The Director of the museum aimed for the “elaboration of
Darwinian theory” (p. 398) and wanted to ensure that specimens met his “scientific requirements”. He developed boundary objects in the form of specific processes which guided amateur and professionals in collecting, and museum staff in curating, the specimens and in so doing provided bridging to enable the group to work in a common endeavour. Wenger (1998) asserts that that boundary crossing is made possible in two ways. The first way crossing is enabled is by the use of boundary objects in the form of “documents, terms, concepts and other forms of reification around which communities of practice can organize their interconnections” (p. 105).

In the literature, the term boundary object represents ways cooperation is achieved between related sites, or communities of practice, working on a common endeavour. In this thesis, the term boundary object will be used to describe the range of resources or processes which assist in establishing VCAL educator continuity of teaching between familiar and unfamiliar spaces or act as interconnections between different communities of practice (Star & Griesemer 1989; Wenger 1998).

**Potential boundary crossing objects**

A search of the VCAA website reveals that a range of documents, teaching resources and explanatory publications (boundary objects) are available to VCAL providers and educators as they begin, and continue to teach in the VCAL program. The VCAA is the authoritative source for all VCAL procedures and information. Documentation regarding the VCAL program is openly accessible at [http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vcal/providers/index.aspx](http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/Pages/vcal/providers/index.aspx) as is documentation for other Victorian schooling curricula. Resources on the website include documentation for providers, industry and community partners, parents and students and educators. Documentation includes the curriculum planning guides containing the required learning outcomes and exemplars of completed Quality Assurance templates. VCAA VCAL managers are contactable by both providers and VCAL educators.
Resources provided by VALA can also be regarded as potential boundary crossing objects. However access to the resources is through membership of the organisation [http://vala.asn.au/]. VALA works in conjunction with the VCAA to provide a VCAL induction day at the beginning of the Australian school year for new-to-VCAL educators. The annual VALA conference, held during the middle of the year, provides the opportunity of a professional development day for applied learning educators. Additionally VALA runs other professional development activities for VCAL educators on a regular basis throughout the year.

As mentioned in Chapter One a critical boundary crossing object ceased at the end of 2011 when government funding for VCAL coordinators was discontinued (VALA 2011). This funding was intended to increase the time available for VCAL staff to develop resources, such as sourcing and developing partnerships and projects with community or industry groups.

Akkermann and Bakker (2011) warn that “artifacts [sic] can fail as boundary objects when they do not fully or rightfully capture multiple meanings and perspectives” (p. 141). The data will be examined to ascertain if the potential boundary objects described above are useful to VCAL educators. Other boundary crossing objects may also be identified.

The second way Wenger (1998) believes boundaries are crossed is by “brokering”, that is the introduction of “elements of one practice into another” (p. 105). Wenger’s (2003) notion of “brokering’ appears similar to Griffiths and Guile’s perception of boundary crossing, as it involves a process of “horizontal development” (p. 61). For Griffiths and Guile (2003) “horizontal development” means that “learners have to develop the capability to mediate between different forms of expertise and the demands of different contexts” (p. 61).

There is no available research detailing what elements of previous practices are used by VCAL educators to enable transition from one practice to another. This research aims to contribute to that knowledge gap.
Stages of learning as boundaries are crossed

In their review of boundary crossing literature, Akkerman and Bakker (2011) identify four dialogical stages of learning that occur as individuals successfully realise developmental potential between differing practices or knowledge areas. The first stage is identifying that one practice differs from another in sociocultural construction (p. 142). The second stage is coordination, which includes identifying objects or procedures that enable a diverse range of workers to work successfully on a common task (p. 143) or enable individuals to move between two different practices (p. 144). In studies that use boundary crossing as an interventionist approach to improve practice, a third learning stage is reflection in which perspectives and understandings are extended (p. 145), while a fourth stage is transformation during which practices are changed and, potentially new ones created (p. 146). As this research is not interventionist in nature only the first two stages may be discernible, that is that VCAL educators may articulate differences between VCAL and their previous practice/s and describe ways they have managed their boundary crossing. Despite the third dialogical stage not being specifically planned for in my research approach, it is likely that both of the first two stages would include some sort of description of VCAL educators’ reflective processes.

Defining the field in this discussion

Hobbs (2014) stresses the importance of defining and describing the context and limits of the field when using the language of boundary crossing to describe learning that occurs from movement between practices and specialist areas of knowledge.

The VCAL is taught in a range of school, Adult Community Education (ACE), Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and other Registered Training Organisations in community settings. Staff qualified to teach VCAL include trained teachers, qualified tradespersons and/or holders of Certificate IV in
Workplace Training and Assessment. Due to the counter cultural nature of teaching and learning approaches used in the program, teaching in VCAL requires educators to move from a curriculum knowledge domain or teaching approach context with which they are familiar to learning a new curriculum with its own cultural conventions including a new language or discourse (Gee 2014) related to the field. Teachers moving into the field of VCAL may have previously taught in early or middle years, VET or adult education. Additionally literature warns that not all educators in ACE and TAFE are necessarily trained teachers (Cornford 1999; Cranton 1996; Schofield, Walsh & Melville 2000; Zuber-Skerritt 1992). Cranton (1996) cautions that educators who work in adult settings, such as ACE, may come from diverse pathways and “[t]heir preparation for the role of educator is often minimal” (p. xi).

In this research, the field includes teachers of VCAL curriculum strands. This will allow wide and rich description of the nature of educator professional learning when teaching VCAL.

**Boundary crossing as a stand-alone theory**

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) reported that since language around boundary crossing and boundary objects was first introduced into scholarly discourse as stand-alone terminology, these concepts have come to be regarded as accepted components of “cultural historical activity theory on expansive learning (Engeström, 1987) and situated learning theory within communities of practice (Wenger, 1998)” (p. 133). However I cannot identify any literature that argues the reverse, that is, use of boundary crossing theory must be used in conjunction with either activity theory or communities of practice (or other theory). Both theories use the language of boundary crossing to “stress how boundaries carry potential for learning” (Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 133) when describing phenomena occurring within activity or communities of practice. Activity theory however is regarded as interventionist research for studying phenomena in the context of historical change and is “a form of action research” (Langemeyer &
Nissen 2011, p. 184) which lies outside the scope of this research. Neither is my research an extended analysis of the boundary crossing of VCAL educators, for which cultural historical activity theory has been argued as appropriate (Akkermann & Bakker 2011 citing Engeström, Engeström & Vähäaho 1999; Engeström 2001; Roth & Lee 2007). My research is a case study which describes and provides meaning to the everyday learning experiences of VCAL educators as they teach.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have explained the introduction and structure of the VCAL program in Victoria, Australia in order to provide context for the data gained from interviews with VCAL educators which are provided as narrative extracts in Chapter Five, Six and Seven, and my analysis of it in Chapter Eight. The VCAA principles of applied learning which guide VCAL educators in their teaching and learning practice have been detailed and explored in relation to how they require VCAL educators to work and think about learning in ways that are counter cultural to existing teaching practice architectures. I have provided discussion of boundary crossing theory and how it can be used as a framework to describe discontinuities, ambiguities and professional learning experienced by VCAL educators as they go about their everyday work. I have defined the boundaries of the field, and by association, the sites where learning occurs as teachers move between different modes of teaching practice.

In Chapter Three I provide a review of literature related to everyday teacher, adult, informal and incidental learning. I consider the implications of life experiences and personal dispositions on the adult learning of VCAL educators.
Chapter Three: Learning in the workplace

Introduction

As previously explained in Chapter Two, boundary crossing provides potential for learning to occur when the zone between two sites of sociocultural difference is navigated. My specific research interest is the learning of VCAL educators as they move from teaching a familiar curriculum to using an unfamiliar curriculum and pedagogy. Subsequently in this chapter my discussion focus is on investigating what is known about learning theories of which evidence could reasonably be expected in my later analysis of data.

I commence this chapter by providing an analysis of what is already known about adult learning, followed by everyday teacher workplace learning. I then discuss informal and incidental learning, followed by learning from experience and reflection. I briefly consider workplace and situated learning, although, as I will explain, its relevance to my research appears minimal. I consider learning in communities of practice and teacher professional development. I then discuss the consequences of existing cultures, workplace practices and contexts, on learning. I conclude the chapter by considering the influence of dispositions on individuals’ potential for learning.

Identifying literature relevant to adult and workplace learning

I found literature resulting from searches for “learning from experience” or “workplace learning” predominately related to structured, guided, organised or blended learning experiences which combine theory in one setting with work placement in another. Searches for “organisational learning” resulted in research which reflected either proactive or reactive interventionist approaches to creating organisational knowledge capacity, improving management practices or improving core business. The results from these searches were not compatible with describing everyday adult workplace learning, which is the aim
of this study. Over time a number of authors have argued a lack of availability of research on unplanned professional learning from experience in the everyday workplace (for example see Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993; Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek & Dochy 2014). This research aims to contribute to increasing knowledge about everyday workplace learning.

Two articles serendipitously provided the start point for a search of literature relevant to understanding and describing learning which occurs in the course of everyday teacher work. The first was an article by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) which considered the experience of everyday teacher workplace learning in four differing subject areas against the individual cultures and practices of each subject area. This differed somewhat from my own research given their intent to explore the role of teacher learning within communities of practice. However, their work suggested learning theories, which provided an entry point for my reviewing of literature. The second article was a recent review of literature on informal learning in which Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) sought to more broadly reconceptualise and acknowledge ways learning occurs in individuals’ everyday lives.

Consideration of both articles suggested learning theories such as: adult learning, learning from experience, teacher workplace learning, informal learning, incidental learning, learning from reflection and dispositions of learners. These theories were appropriate to my research focus and their keywords guided my search for literature. I confined the resultant literature (unless indicated otherwise) to articles which examined unplanned everyday adult learning in the workplace.

**Adult learning**

Foremost in this research is a focus on the everyday adult learning experienced by VCAL educators. According to Merriam (2004), concepts of adult learning are incorporated in various ways into a wide range of distinct fields, for example
adult education, human resource development and continuing professional education (p. 199). Within these contexts learning may be planned, unplanned, self-directed or imposed. Merriam (2004) states that the advancement of knowledge about how adults learn “can be divided in three periods” being “whether adults could learn”, “how adult learning ... [was] different from the way in which children learn” and the more recent contributions to “adult learning theory ... from disciplines outside the field of adult education” (p. 199).

In this section on adult learning I include literature related to the second period, the third is incorporated elsewhere in this chapter.

Knowles was a significant influence in the late 20th century in understanding how adults learn (Henry 2009). Knowles (1990) spent over 40 years attempting to devise a model of “the unique characteristics of adult learners” (p. 54) with which to inform the work of adult educators. He had been concerned that the dominant pedagogical model of teaching and learning at that time was based on beliefs about how children should be taught and was teacher directed (the teacher decided what was to be taught) and teacher dependent (the learner was dependent on the teacher for all knowledge) (p. 54). Knowles (1990) speculated with growing support from research ... that as individuals mature, their need and capacity to be self-directing, to utilize their experience in learning, to identify their own readinesses to learn, and to organize their learning around life problems, increases steadily from infancy to pre-adolescence, and then increases rapidly during adolescence. (p. 55)

Having theorised that adults learn differently from children, Knowles (1990) developed an andragogical model intended to optimise adult learning. His model is based on six assumptions he had determined from research as to how adults learn best. They are:

- Adults need to know why they are learning something.
- Adults have a self-concept of being responsible for their own decisions.
- Adults come into an educational activity with a range of life experiences.
• Adults are ready to learn what they need to know.
• Adults are life-centred in their orientation to learning.
• Adults are self motivated to learn.

(p. 57-63)

Knowles’ (1990) assumptions on adult learning, or andragogy, were first published in 1970. Over the next decade he began to receive reports from teachers of children and adolescents that they found his andragogical model very effective. He also received reports from adult educators that his principles of adult learning were not applicable in the contexts in which they worked (p. 63). Drawing on this feedback Knowles (1990) reconceptualised his interpretation that andragogy and pedagogy were dichotomies and described the differences between them as follows:

[t]he pedagogical model is an ideological model which excludes the andragogical assumptions. The andragogical model is a system of assumptions which include the pedagogical assumptions. (p. 64; see also Henry 2009, p. 186)

Knowles clarification that the assumptions of each model are more accurately described as points on a continuum of assumptions (Henry 2009, p. 186) about how people learn is important to my research for two reasons. First the theoretical foundation of VCAL draws on youth engagement and adult learning theories (VCAA 2011b; VCAA 2013) so teaching and learning theories which VCAL educators should use include adult learning theories. Second my study describes the learning experienced by adult educators. While the context in which their learning occurs is not a formal learning program, the assumptions about how adults learn will inform the interpretation of my data when considering how adults learn new information.

Knowles’ (1990) andragogical process model is intended for use by educators in developing and structuring formal adult learning programs. However some elements of his model may have relevance to my study as language to describe
the context surrounding everyday workplace learning of adults as they look inwards to identify and respond to their own learning needs.

Knowles’ (1990) andragogical process model has seven elements, they are:

- First, ensuring there is a mutual, respectful, collaborative, informal climate for learning (pp. 119-125). This means that physical, social and psychological environments impact on learning.
- Second, ensuring there is the opportunity for mutual planning of learning (pp. 119, 125-126). This means supporting the learner in planning their own learning.
- Third, diagnosing of learning needs (pp. 119, 126-129). This means the learner balances what they have individually identified as their learning needs with the requirements of the organisation and wider society.
- Fourth, formulation of learning objectives (pp. 119, 129-133). Knowles explains that discussion is contested about what a learning objective is, due mainly to a variety of arguments in which it is argued as dependent on the learning perspective, eg behaviourist, cognitivist etc.
- Fifth, design (pp. 119, 133-136). This requires the learner to be involved in planning their learning program.
- Sixth, activities (pp. 119, 136). Knowles highlights that a critical factor in undertaking meaningful activities is access to quality resources. For Knowles, resources include quality teachers who are able to teach using the andragogical process model, rather than the traditional transmissive pedagogical model. Here Knowles speaks to adult educators and challenges readers by saying
  
  the most critical aspect of your role as program administrator is your function as a developer of human resources development personnel. (p. 136)
  
- Seventh, evaluation (pp. 119, 136-139). This element asks educators to participate in self and collaborative reflection to “improve teaching and learning” (p. 137).
Pratt (1993) suggested that despite Knowles’ theory of andragogy informing “our understanding of adults as learners, it did little to expand or clarify understanding of the process of learning” theories about what learning is remained elusive (p. 21). However Pratt (1993) inferred from Knowles’ work that understanding adult learning involves consideration of the existence of two principles of learning: mentioned here for their relevance to my study

[f]irst, knowledge is assumed to be actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment; and second, learning is an interactive process of interpretation, integration, and transformation of one’s experiential world. (p. 17)

Fenwick and Tennant (2004) claim that understandings of how adults learn, including an assumption that all adults learn in the same way, or respond well to one learning approach, have been contested in recent decades. However a discussion of adult learning styles is not taken up here as my focus is on understanding adult learning which happens during the experience of everyday work.

**Teacher workplace learning**

School is a workplace for teachers. Subsequently it can be regarded as paradoxical that they experience informal and incidental learning during the experience of teaching formal learning programs.

VCAL educators’ everyday adult learning is situated in an authentic task-related context (workplace) which has a socially constructed nature with context-authentic objects accessible. Merriam (2004) argues that

[u]nderstanding human cognition means examining it in situations of authentic activity, in which actual cognitive processes are required, rather than in situations of simulated activity. (p. 209)

In my research, VCAL educators’ learning, experienced as they teach is “situation specific” (Merriam 2004, p. 209). Subsequently I am able to describe their learning and “situated cognition” (Merriam 2004, p. 209 italics in original). Billett
(2001) has written extensively about the effectiveness of learning in the workplace but he also warns of downsides

[learning unintended and undesirable knowledge is an inevitable outcome of learning through participation in everyday work activity, and some of this learning will directly influence how individuals conduct their work. (p. 114)]

This is a possibility for VCAL educators who are working in environments where applied learning teaching approaches are counter cultural to existing practices and where vocational students, teachers and programs may be perceived negatively (Argyris & Schön 1974; Blake 2009; Brown & Sutton 2008; Connell et al. 1982; Henry et al. 2003; Jenkins 2014; Pritchard & Anderson 2009).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2004) study of teacher learning across disciplines and schools revealed that ways in which teachers learned “about teaching [was] by teaching” and included “trial and error” (p. 24). This is consistent with other literature that claims much knowledge about teaching is gained during the practice of teaching (Hammerness et al. 2005; Kirby 2009). However Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004), having taken into account the “wider organisational and occupational factors” along with the dispositions of the participants, also reported it was evident that differences between cultures of the subject or discipline area in which teachers worked impacted on learning (p. 25). This observation may be relevant to my own study as the literature shows vocationally related learning programs and the staff who work in them are frequently regarded in a negative light, even from fellow teachers within the same setting (Blake 2009; Brown & Sutton 2008; Connell et al 1982; Henry et al. 2003; Jenkins 2014; Pritchard & Anderson 2009). Therefore it follows that the nature of the relationships with other teachers, either within the VCAL program or the wider organisation may impact on individual or collaborative opportunities for learning.

Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016) conducted a study that explored the classroom learning of teachers in terms of their professional agency (p. 1). They argue while there is an expectation that teachers will undertake ongoing
structured professional learning, unplanned learning also occurs “in the everyday practices of their work” (p. 2), although this should not be assumed (p. 2 citing Darling-Hammond 2008). Their research was conducted in response to a lack of knowledge “in terms of teachers’ professional agency in [their] classroom” (p. 2). They define professional agency as a “capacity” for “intentional and responsible management of new learning, at individual, classroom and community level (p. 3 citing Pyhältö, Pietarinen & Pietarinen 2012). They argue that the individual experiences, attitudes and beliefs of the teacher in regard to learning, along with the cultural context of the school impacts on “teachers’ ability to act as an active agent of learning in the classroom” (p. 4) in regard to their own and student learning.

Teacher capacity to engage with particular teaching and learning strategies is also impacted by their past experiences. One example, among others, that could relate to VCAL educators practice, is Pyhältö, Pietarinen and Pietarinen’s (2012, cited by Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016) finding that the ability to form effective pedagogical relationships with students is affected by the educator’s experience of learning relationships with the educator’s own teachers. As I am considering the learning of VCAL educators in terms of boundary crossing I will looking at the data for patterns, qualities or elements that enable their teaching continuity across teaching spaces which are socioculturally different.

In their study Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016) draw on boundary crossing theory to describe the ability to share learning gained individually in the classroom with professional colleagues outside of the classroom. They are however cautioned by arguments in literature that what teachers learn in the classroom may not be automatically shared with professional colleagues (p. 4).

Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö’s (2016) research differs from my own as they confine their research to examination of teachers’ professional agency in their
own classroom learning and include testing hypotheses related to the relationship of professional agency to burnout (p. 6).

Formal Informal and Incidental learning

This research does not intentionally interrogate the formal pre-service teacher education courses undertaken by VCAL educators, but research participants may refer to their pre-service teacher preparation or other formal learning undertaken while responding to questions about how they learnt about teaching in VCAL. Formal learning is normally structured and directed by an institution (educational or otherwise), has learning support from a mentor or teaching staff and is related to specific pre-stated learning outcomes (Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek & Dochy 2014; Marsick and Watkins 1990).

Song and Bonk (2016) investigated “motivational factors and self-directed learning aspects of informal learning when using online learning resources” (p. 1). A challenge for them was determining what constitutes informal learning as they identified a range of understandings in their sampling. For example Bull et al. (2008) believed informal learning occurred outside of school while Sefton-Green (2004) considered that learning related to recreation was informal (Song & Bonk 2016, p. 2)

In this discussion I draw on the work of Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993), Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek and Dochy (2014), along with Marsick and Watkins (1990) to inform my use of the term informal learning. Subsequently informal learning can include incidental learning, as being normally directed by the learner themselves, in contexts that may, but not necessarily, include organisations or institutions. Informal learning can also occur while undertaking structured learning either individually or socially but without specific leadership.

In their early work on informal learning, Marsick and Watkins (1990) theorised that incidental learning is a by-product of informal learning, normally taking
place in everyday experience, although the learner may not always be aware they have processed information and learning has taken place. In later work with Maria Cseh, Marsick, Watkins and Lovin (2010) reconceptualised the learning model and considered “[i]nformal and incidental learning outcomes depend, in part, on the degree of conscious awareness with which one attends learning and the environment that brings learning opportunities” (p. 63). A number of writers argue that informal learning accounts for the largest contribution to workplace learning. Matthews and Candy (1999) assert the amount is “as much as 90 percent” (p. 49), while others suggest 80 percent (Kyndt, Govaerts, Verbeek & Dochy, 2014, p. 2394).

Although there appears recognition of the prevalence of informal learning in workplaces, Kyndt et al. (2014) believe research relating to measuring the results of informal workplace learning is “scarce” (p. 2393). This was not an isolated perception. In response to what Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) saw was a need to understand “the different types of informal learning” (p. i) along with the aim of articulating possibilities and barriers provided by informal learning, they published a review of “600 publications” predominately published “in the last 25 years” (p. i). From their research Van Noy, James and Bedley’s final definition of informal learning appears more comprehensive than that of Marsick, Watkins and Lovin (2010). For Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016)

[e]veryday informal learning ... takes place at school, work, community or home. It does not include an instructor or an organized curriculum, and learners have a range of intentionality in which the learning can be self-directed, incidental, and/or embedded in the process of socialization. (p. i)

In their review Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) identified “two broad categories” of informal learning: “organised informal learning” and “everyday informal learning” (2016, p. iii). In this review, to align with my research, I focus on their findings related to everyday informal learning. They identified three types of everyday informal learning: “self-directed learning”, “incidental learning” and “tacit learning” (p. iv).
Given that the focus of my research is everyday workplace learning, I am cautioned by Van Noy, James and Bedley’s (2016) work. They reported that the limitations of everyday informal learning include “[n]ot all individuals are able to access and benefit from informal learning” (p. i), challenges in accreditation (p. iii) and “the worker only learn[ing] non-transferable superficial skills” (p. iii).

Included in the pedagogical teaching and learning approaches of the VCAL program is an assumption that learning experienced by students in an authentic context (formal, informal and incidental) can be transferred to other contexts. While my focus is on the learning of the VCAL educators, I wonder if VCAL educators acquire transferable skills in the same manner as their students? Can all VCAL educators access informal learning opportunities and how can the informal learning of VCAL educators be measured?

Van Noy, James and Bedley’s (2016) review of literature identified contradictions in definitions of informal learning and the way the term was used in discussion. For example they argue that in literature which investigates informal, adult and lifelong learning the perspective is frequently that of the individual (p. 2). In literature which investigates workplace informal learning, the perspective is “often [from] an organizational standpoint” (2016, p. 2). In other instances it is hard to make a “clear distinction” between “formal and informal learning” (Van Noy, James & Bedley 2016, p. 3).

In their attempt to define the formality of learning, Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) propose a continuum based on “four key attributes of learning” being “location, process, content, and purpose” (p. 3). My investigation of the everyday learning of teachers challenges the appropriateness of their continuum categories as the location of teacher learning is in a classroom, which is also a workplace, both of which are generally regarded as location criteria for the occurrence of formal learning. Neither does everyday teacher workplace learning neatly match a place on the continuum in regard to the content category which they acknowledge as being contested in regards to what content, “externally
imposed” or “chosen by the learner” (p. 4) is regarded as informal or formal. My own research will add perspective to the dilemma as I argue the informal everyday learning of VCAL educators occurs as a result of VCAL educators’ boundary crossing from familiar to unfamiliar teaching contexts. Thus if an educator chooses to teach in VCAL, their learning can be regarded as chosen, but at the same time learning is imposed because of the choice the educator has made. Educators who are instructed to teach VCAL may choose to learn willingly or unwillingly, in order to continue being employed. Alternatively, they may choose to continue teaching using their existing teaching and learning approaches, that is choose not to learn about the applied nature of VCAL.

Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) cite Sambrook who suggests there is a “distinction between learning at work versus learning in work” and disconcertingly believes that learning at work can be regarded as “formal learning ... that occur[s] away from the job” (p. 9). By this Sambrook means learning that occurs at the workplace, but not while undertaking work. His argument provides evidence of the contested and contradictory nature of understandings of both workplace learning and informal / formal learning. Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) go on to record that Sambrook’s understanding of learning in work tends to consist of the more informal processes embedded in regular work activities, such as asking questions, observing, working, coaching and problem solving. (p. 9 citing Sambrook 2005)

Their review and attempts to categorise learning appears to ignore or overlook consideration of the informal workplace learning of education professionals whose workplace is an educational institution where unstructured, unintended incidental and informal learning can also occur.

From their literature review Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) made connections between a range of learning theories and informal learning such as constructivism, situated learning, experiential learning and relational learning. They indicate that the theories were not necessarily identified separately and that often they are mutually supportive. As a result these authors concluded that
a more comprehensive “understanding of informal learning was needed” (p. iv), a gap to which this research seeks to contribute.

McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) conducted research on informal learning experienced by new teachers in Scottish schools. A small initial research project had revealed that for beginning teachers “there was something happening outside the formal structures and systems ... that was closer to the reality of the lived experience” (p. 322). As a result they decided to pursue further research focusing on the beginning teachers’ informal learning. A review of literature revealed acceptance of the importance of informal learning but at the same time a dismissive attitude to it. They related the following:

> [t]here is a strong tendency for policy makers, researchers and practitioners to admit readily the importance of informal learning and then proceed to develop policy, theory and practice without further reference to it. (p. 323 quoting Coffield 2000, p. 2)

McNally, Blake and Reid’s (2009) research interviews were conducted by teacher-researchers working across 20 Scottish schools who spoke with 110 beginning teachers “every few weeks over the first year” (p. 324). The interviews “probed new teachers’ experiences with the purpose of gaining a detailed picture of their early learning - who and what was important and why” (McNally, Blake & Reid 2009, p. 324). The main themes arising from their study revealed “that the early experience of teaching is largely informal with strong emotional and relational dimensions associated with identity formation” (McNally, Blake & Reid 2009, p. 324). Their findings are certainly relevant to my research in that I will describe the learning of VCAL educators as they experience unfamiliar teaching contexts. While I intend to extend their work, a point of difference is that my participants are not necessarily beginning teachers, although neither were beginning teachers excluded from my study.

It is revealing that the two main learning dimension themes McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) identified (emotional and relational) relate to feelings. For example, as beginning teachers approached their first day at work they felt “butterflies”,

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“nerves”, “panic” and self-doubt (p. 324). McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) highlight there is an omission of reference by the beginning teachers to the professional toolkit of teaching and learning skills provided in their pre-service teaching education program. Rather the focus of the beginning teachers’ discussion tended to orientate around the effect experience had on their learning. Their descriptions of teaching experiences changed to include “pleased”, “liked” and “happier” and become more optimistic in nature (p. 325). This suggests that beginning teachers’ emotional development not only evolves within the classroom, but also other spaces in the school, such as the corridor, where their teacher identity formation, includes “[b]eing recognised” (p. 325).

They noted other work (Eraut 2004; Hargreaves 1998), where similar findings highlighted the significance of teacher emotions on professional development and informal learning working in the workplace.

McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) acknowledged that it was difficult to separate the relational learning dimension from the emotional as they are “frequently associated if not integral” (p. 325). They cite Lohmann (2000) who says that informal learning is inhibited in “[a]n environment that hinders affective and relational engagement” (McNally, Blake & Reid 2009, p. 325). Forming good relationships with experienced staff clearly impacted positively on beginning teachers’ abilities to learn to be teachers. Examples of informal support provided by existing staff include the provision of a home phone number, informal mentoring and informal advice on student profiles. These interactions resulted in beginning teachers feeling supported and recognised as legitimate colleagues (pp. 325–326).

McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) compared their findings to other research and concluded that these types of informal relationships at work should not only be seen in terms of beginning friendships and are “more than just a means or a context in which professional learning takes place; it is integral to becoming a teacher” (p. 326). They critically interrogated their research to determine exactly
what learning occurred. They acknowledge one challenge in investigating informal learning is that nothing specific may be apparent and in their own case they often came back to “the robust theme of informal relationality” (p. 327) rather than specific cognitive skills. They concluded that “learning to teach or becoming a teacher” (p. 328) are intertwined and that the emotional and relational aspects of becoming a teacher were important foundations in which more tangible teaching and learning thinking and skills were embedded. Their research has several implications for my own study. The first is that describing the informal learning VCAL educators experience may be problematic in regard to what it actually represents or contributes to their professional learning. Paradoxically a second implication is the outcomes of informal learning may be tacitly rather than explicitly evident in their learning to be a VCAL educator.

**Learning from experience**

As my research describes the everyday workplace learning experiences of VCAL educators I briefly include mention of learning by experience. This, along with inclusion of adult learning theory, may appear ironic as experiential learning and adult learning theory inform the constructive teaching and learning theories the VCAL educators use. However in this study the learning of the VCAL educators is my focus.

In my research the learning from experience being studied is not structured, situated, planned or aligned with imposed “workplace curriculum” (Billett 2001) as is the case for VCAL students. My study aims to describe the learning that is associated with actions and experience (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993; Gonzci 2004; Van Noy, James & Bedley 2016) during VCAL educators’ everyday work. A growing body of work predominately refers to formal structured programs or work-integrated learning components of related courses. Very little research appears to explore the learners’ experiences (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993).
For learning to result from experience there needs to be “active engagement” with the experience for learning to occur (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993, p. 4), a notion that Mezirow (1990) argued needs to be interpreted. When the interpretation is used to guide future actions then, “making meaning becomes learning” (p. 1). On the other hand Mezirow (1990) also argues

when the experience is too strange or threatening to the way we think or learn, we tend to block it out or resort to psychological defense mechanisms to provide a more compatible interpretation. (p. 4)

The next section examines the role of reflection as an intellectual resource drawn on to make sense of experience.

Learning from reflection

In this research, I rely on an oral account of how VCAL educators have made meaning out of their experiences, rather than [my] observing how experience has informed [their] future actions. The process of articulating their everyday learning experiences tacitly required educators to reflect and consider their past experiences and subsequent actions.

Just as reflection is a critical element of the VCAL program to enable student experience to transform into learning, educators are encouraged to continually reflect on their experiences and so create their own new understandings as they teach. Latham, Blaise, Faulkner, Lang and Malone (2006) refer to reflection as an essential skill for all teachers as it is a means of turning back to experience in the moments of teaching (in-action) or after them (upon action) (Schön 1987) in order to improve the choices that are made and to further or abandon the direction of that experience. (p. xvi)

Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016) have reported that “reflection in action” is a predominant form of teacher learning (p. 2 citing Brookfield 1995, Lohman & Woolf 2001). They also highlight, as others do (for example Marsick, Watkins & Lovin 2010; Mezirow 1990), that reflection does not guarantee learning. Marsick, Watkins and Lovin (2010) explain various learning stages of their formal, informal and incidental learning model using actions of paramedics. They concluded
“[r]eflection is central to every phase of learning from experience although everyone does not always consciously use reflection to its fullest potential” (p. 66). For example they acknowledge that the act of writing an incident report will not necessarily translate into learning but explain many paramedics in the study benefited from completing a written evaluation of their incident reports as they then needed to look critically at their own thinking and writing. As Fenwick and Tennant (2004) point out "[a]ll reflective learning theories share one central belief: as learners we construct, through reflection, a personal understanding of relevant structures of meaning derived from our actions in the world” (p. 60). This means that reflection involves interaction between action and experience in a social setting and subsequent reflective thought to make meaning of events in a particular context.

When learners choose to learn, that is, are open to considering new information in light of their own experience, observations and self-concepts, they can be regarded as self-directed learners (Darkenwald & Merriam 1982; Knowles, n.d.; Merriam, 1993). When learners consider new information in light of their own experience (reflect), and react to the reflection process by considering future actions in light of new information, they become reflexive learners or “active constructors of knowledge, reading and new meanings and realities” (Fenwick & Tennant 2004, p. 56).

Learning can become transformative when, during the process of reflection, learners put aside held assumptions and beliefs and critically examine those assumptions and beliefs in view of evidence and experience that unsettle them (Mezirow 1994, p. 223). Programs such as VCAL have the potential to be transformative for students by providing an opportunity to break free from a disposition to generational unemployment and resistance to accepting the rights and responsibilities inherent in responsible citizenship. For VCAL educators, learning to teach in the program may require them to examine their assumptions and beliefs about how learning occurs and what constitutes effective teacher practice. Mezirow (1990) believes that learning
may be defined as the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation, and action. (p. 1)

Mezirow (1990) goes on to argue that reflection is the process by which “distortions in our beliefs and errors in problem solving” are corrected (p. 1). However, he also says “[c]ritical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built” (p. 1). Due to the countercultural nature of VCAL, and the nature of the practice architectures within provider settings, consideration of Mezirow’s work on transformative learning is valuable as he argues that our “habits of expectation” (p. 2) that is, established ways in which things are understood impact on how new experiences are interpreted. He uses the examples of “[l]over-beloved, teacher-student, employer-employee, priest-parishioner” (p. 2) to show that understanding the relationships between related terms depends on recognising, and accepting a widely held, established perspective of how each position in the relationship has been constructed over a period of time. He calls this way of perceiving events “meaning perspectives”.

Mezirow (1990) suggests that individual meaning perspectives may have origins from several foundations. The first is “cultural assimilation” (p. 3), from living in the world individuals absorb widely held cultural norms, he uses the examples of “conservative, liberal and radical viewpoints” (p. 3). A second is philosophical perspectives which are “intentionally learned” (p. 3). A third perspective is through “stereotypes” which are “unintentionally learned” (p. 3) although clearly these are also a form of cultural assimilation and the perspective can vary dependent on the environment in which they are learned. For example, learning about what it means to be a woman from inside a matriarchal society would contrast to learning what it means to be a woman when working in an organisation which supports victims of domestic violence. As a result of personally held meaning perspectives, Mezirow (1990) argues

what we do and do not perceive, comprehend, and remember is profoundly influenced ... [w]e trade off perception and cognition for relief from the anxiety
generated when ... experience does not comfortably fit these meaning structures. ... [The] process of reflection back on prior learning ... [determines] whether what we have learned is justified under present circumstances. (pp. 4-5)

Mezirow (1990) provides language for me to differentiate between the actions-during-practice of educators who draw on what they already know, which he labels as *thoughtful action* (p. 6 italics in original) and educators who “critically examine the justification” of their belief, which he labels *reflective action* (p. 6 italics in original). Mezirow labels the post-practice process during which learners reflect back on thoughtful action and question the presuppositions on which their reflective action was based as *critical reflection* (p. 6 italics in original). Mezirow (1990) provides a fourth term to describe learning which appears to align with Akkermann and Bakker’s (2011) assertion that learning from boundary crossing may be the result of creating a hybrid practice, that is introducing elements of one practice into another. The term Mezirow (1990) uses is *communicative learning* (p. 8 italics in original), which he defines as searching, often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into a meaning perspective, so that an interpretation becomes possible. (p. 9)

This may require the learner, in this case the VCAL educator, to create a new learning perspective so as to integrate their existing understanding with what happened during a particular action. As others have pointed out, this can occur individually or which a group. Yet as Boud, Cohen and Walker (1993) caution, outcomes from engaging in group reflections will be affected firstly by the way in which members of the group interpreted the experience and secondly, by the “unique history and perceptions” of each member of the group (p. 5). This is a variable factor which may impact on my interpretation of the data; I will not necessarily be able to determine whether the account of research participants experience has been filtered through their own individual reflection or as the result of engaging in discussion and reflection with one or more others.
Not all literature argues that purposeful teacher reflection will naturally result in meaningful learning. Hostetler (2016) is concerned that the language of reflection has begun to create an ideology. Within the emerging ideology “teachers’ experience and the ethical perception they develop” is dismissed as not legitimate knowing (p. 188) in favour of judging how competent teachers are by their ability to understand stages of reflection and carry them out.

Hostetler (2016) accepts that reflection is an important way of producing self-research to inform future practice, but only if teacher dispositions are oriented in the right way for real reflection to occur. He cites Lear to argue

[t]o reflect well and appropriately, one must first achieve the right orientation, be the right sort of subject: ‘[i]t would seem that if we are searching for wisdom, we find it not by finding the right object, but by becoming the right sort of subject. Only when one becomes the right kind of subject will one see the world with the appropriate objectivity’. (p. 187 citing Lear 2003, p. 86)

Hostetler (2016) contends that perception should also be recognised as a valid catalyst for present and future action. He considered research conducted by Klein of how experts, for example nurses, employed in “complex situations” did “not suspend judgment for the sake of reflection; they just know what to do” (p. 181). Hostetler (2016) subsequently argues that “[g]ood teaching is more experienced-based than research-based” as perception comes from experience (p. 179). He compares the arguments of Dewey who argues that “reflection is an indicator of expertise” (Hostetler 2016, p. 181) and the work of Klein who argues that novices are more likely to need to reflect due to their inexperience (Hostetler 2016, p. 181). Hostetler accepts that “good perception does not guarantee good results [b]ut neither does good reflection” (p. 182). He argues the value of drawing on experience to make decisions in the moment rather than waiting to gather evidence from which to make a decision. However, similar to his argument that good outcomes from reflection require practitioners who have the right orientation, Hostetler’s argument requires the practitioner to understand (as he says) “the conditions under which her perceptions are reliable” (p. 184). Subsequently Hostetler’s argument of decision making from perception appears similar to Mezirow’s (1990) argument of decision making
from thoughtful action in which the decision maker draws on what they know. Neither approach includes the decision maker first justifying the premises on which their judgement is predicated.

Regardless of the similarities or contradictions between Hostetler’s (2016) view of action from perception or Mezirow’s (1990) action from thoughtful or reflective action, they both provide examples of ways in which experience can inform action when the circumstances or context are unfamiliar. As a result both provide useful language with which to understand and describe the everyday professional learning of VCAL educators.

**Workplace and situated learning**

Billett (2001) has written extensively about workplace learning. He asserts there is long-standing evidence of the efficacy of learning in the workplace. Prior to the establishment of vocational colleges and universities, most people learnt their vocations through their work. (p. 19)

However, workplace or situated learning infers formal structured learning approaches. These may be in the form of work-integrated learning or cooperative education models, particularly used in higher education settings, where education and workplace settings partner together to optimise learning from combining theory and workplace experience (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden 2010; Lucas 2015). Situated learning is generally regarded as participation in a community of practice situated in a workplace setting where the learner acts as an apprentice, guided and mentored by experienced others. Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to this learning as “legitimate peripheral participation” (p. 29). In this research, my interest is on the everyday learning experienced as VCAL educators teach rather than structured, formal or interventionist workplace learning mechanisms. Subsequently I have deliberately not included a range of literature related to workplace and situated learning.
Learning through communities of practice

While this study does not intentionally set out to examine the work based learning of VCAL educators through the lens of communities of practice, participants may refer to collegial learning practices in describing their professional learning experiences. Additionally I will be describing workplace learning occurring in a range of VCAL provider settings, and those settings could be regarded as communities of practice. Using Wenger’s (1998) definition, a community of practice “need not be reified as such in the discourse of its participants” (p. 125) and need only be “set of relations among persons, activity and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 98). Merriam (2004) asserts that much of context-based learning occurs in the workplace where individuals enter into relationships with other learners, thereby becoming members of a learning community. (p. 210)

I will interpret my data taking into account the context where the learning occurs and as a result may identify specific descriptions of the presence or absence of learning communities.

Communities of practice as a social process (Dewey 1938; Lave & Wenger 1991; Billett 2001) are a natural way to describe the groups (or lack thereof) that hold potential to nurture, support and or enhance learning (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002). Dewey (1938) believes the social process of learning is a unifying one in which learners do not act alone and this is supported by Gonzci (2004) who believes learning occurs “in the communities of practice in which we work and live” (p. 30). Kalantzis and Cope (2012) say that by accepting that cognition is social, then the most powerful learning is collective rather than individual. Education exercises an individual’s capacity to learn in and with the people and knowledge resources that are around them. (p. 209)

However, other literature cautions that communities of practice are able to be powerful tools which aid learning of poor habits, culture and behaviour (Hodge & Ollis 2014). Along with using communities of practice to facilitate learning, there
has also been a tendency since Lave and Wenger (1991) introduced the concept for communities of practice to be used as a tool or stratagem to manage professional learning within organisations (Hughes, Jewson & Unwin 2007, p. 2). This means that positive and negative learning cultures within organisations can be reinforced or reproduced.

In their study, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) chose to use the concept of community of practice to explain “some significant dimensions” to the problem of teacher workplace learning (p. 22). Their study aimed to understand workplace learning of experienced teachers, rather than “newcomers to a workplace” in the way communities of practice was originally conceived by Lave and Wenger (p. 22). They intentionally use contradictions and discontinuities they identified between definitions used in individual work by Lave (1991) and Wenger (1998) as a means of understanding, in two different ways, data they gathered on experienced teacher workplace learning.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2004) study is useful for my purposes for two reasons. The first reason relates to the way collegiality may impact on individual learning in each provider setting. In preparation for their study Hodkinson and Hodkinson separated the abundance of literature they discovered into several categories. The first category was individual learning in workplaces and the influence of the context in which it took place and the second category was learning that occurred as a result of “complex interrelationship which determine the activities people engage in” (p. 22). The third grouping, with which they aligned themselves, was the view that “workers/learners [are] ... integral components of the situations in which they work and learning, rather than separate from them” (p. 22 citing Brown et al. 1989; Wenger 1998).

Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2004) perspectives on discontinuities between the definitions of communities of practice by Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) do not initially appear relevant to my own research. However, a question
they pose as a result of considering contrasts between definitions of communities of practice does appear useful

> [if] learning differs in different communities of practice, what aspects of those differences are determined by more macro factors of organisation, structure and purpose – the large scale version of a community – and what by particular, localised patterns of social interaction – the small scale version. (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004, p. 23)

Their question may help me determine what impact practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) within VCAL provider settings have on everyday collegial learning of VCAL educators. As the participants in the research represent four different VCAL provider contexts (schools, an alternative school, ACE and TAFE), I will also consider differences between settings.

The second reason Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2004) study is useful to me is they identify three “scales of influence on the workplace learning of schoolteachers” (p. 23). The first was the “the structure and practices of schoolteaching” in the context teachers worked (p. 23). The second was “the nature and culture of different subject departments, even within the same school” (p. 23). The third influence was “the dispositions of individual teachers within those schools and departments” (p. 23). The first two influences immediately appear relevant to my own research. I need to be conscious of whether dominant teaching and learning practices in the provider setting influence learning of educators working in the counter cultural VCAL program delivered within that setting. Later in this chapter I review literature regarding the influence of an individual’s disposition on their ability or inclination to learn.

**Teacher professional development**

Learning at work whether structured or informal is expected in all professions to maintain professional knowledge and the responsibility is increasingly on the employee, rather than the employer (Billett 2001b; see also Van Noy, James & Bedley 2016). There is an expectation that registered teachers in Victoria will implement ongoing professional development and learning plans (AITSL 2015) which detail individual and collegial learning they intend to undertake. Despite
this requirement and the associated belief that ongoing teacher professional development and learning will result in improved student learning (eg DEECD 2014; see also Soini, Pietarinen & Pyhältö 2016), there are critics of teacher professional development. Cole (2004) argues that

[i]f one accepts that to ‘develop’ one must at some point show evidence of learning by doing something differently, then most formal development does not develop anyone. (p. 4)

Cole (2004) argues that professional development more generally results in either awareness that change is required or preparedness for development rather than actual development (p. 4). He asserts effective teacher learning is more likely to take place when teachers are supported by a management culture that promotes learning and development and by peer interaction where support and trust already exist (p. 8). Dean (1991) also argues that professional development is optimised when occurring within a positive school culture. However, she relates that in England in the 1990s, the rate of change and the emphasis on accountability has meant that structured professional development is more likely to be themed against what schools believe is necessary, rather than what addresses the professional interest areas of the teachers.

Groundwater-Smith et al. (2009) believe that “[i]t is rare that the conditions for teachers’ learning and continuing professional development are considered seriously” (p. 245). They contextualise their argument by arguing that teacher workplaces are one of the largest in any country (p. 245) and the demands of the 21st century are such that neither teacher education courses nor ad hoc learning is sufficient for the learning needs of today’s teaching workforce. Groundwater-Smith et al. argue today’s teachers must adapt to a diverse student cohort, the changing nature of families, technology, increased accountability and reporting along with responding to changes in curriculum. They provide a number of reasons why teachers might not be able to access professional learning. First is their assertion that there is not a “systematic attempt to ensure” teachers are provided with “adequate professional learning opportunities” and so teachers
must individually identify and access relevant learning (p. 247). Second is their argument that postgraduate study fees have increased while government funding for teacher professional learning has decreased. Subsequently the ability for individuals to access high level learning opportunities within school budgets is limited and, they argue, as teachers are “relatively lowly paid” (p. 247) expensive courses are not an option without additional funding from their employer.

An additional reason that professional development may not be available or considered for organisation funding was identified by Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004). When teachers’ practice needs to change in order to meet requirements of initiatives imposed from outside the school (such as new education policies implemented by government), it is not necessarily the case that there will be an “established expert, only colleagues within and beyond the department to work with” (p. 24) who can provide mentoring or guidance. Additionally externally imposed initiatives may not be compatible with “individual, or departmental agendas for development” (p. 24). In Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s study new initiatives were implemented, regardless of their compatibility with school agendas, “because otherwise pupils, whose learning is the end product of the work, would lose out” (p. 24). In lieu of expert sources to guide professional development, the teachers indicated they learned from “books, journals, television, the Internet, course and exhibitions” (p. 24).

There are a variety of theories regarding the key to success in educating young people. There are those who suggest that socio-economic factors have a strong effect on whether a student performs well at school (Chall, Jacobs & Baldwin 1990; Teese & Polesel 2003). However Teese and Polesel (2003) also argue that schools have a great impact on whether students do well, while Fullan (1993, p. 135) indicates that the “key to learning is the teacher”. Others, such as Professor Richard Elmore, consider that socio-economic background is a contributory factor to performance in school, but agree with the argument that the “quality of
the teacher is the most important factor in determining a child’s success” (Ryan 2007, para 4). Marsh draws on work by others to argue:

> [q]uality teachers are needed more than ever to assist students with their learning ... [a] positive teaching-learning relationship between the teacher and students is crucial at a time when ‘increasing family breakdown, social and economic change and the uncertainties of the “risk” society have made more and more children in schools “casualties of change’’. (2010, p. 393 citing Chauncey & Eckersley)

Fullan (1993) and Marsh (2010) assert the teacher is the key to student learning and an investment in professional development is an investment in student learning. Fullan (1993) expands his view by saying:

> you can’t have a learning society without learning students, and you can’t have learning students without learning teachers. (p. 138)

Billett (2002) argues that “participation in work” is the greatest contributor to the professional development of worker’s skill (p. 28). However, participation in work only results in learning if supported by organisation management. Argyris and Schön (1978) warn that learning can also result in new knowledge that may conflict with existing norms or challenge held beliefs within an organisation. In these cases, there may be resistance to learning demonstrated by lack of support or encouragement by management or reluctance by individuals to change. In other workplace contexts, change is perceived as a choice (p. 23).

**Workplace culture and learning**

Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010) argue that a “cultural” worldview is based on core beliefs and taken-for-granted assumptions regarding social structures, teaching and learning traditions, ways of knowing, life expectations and forms of communication. (p. 69)

Further they argued that learners “removed from their comfort zone and placed in an unfamiliar workplace environment” may experience “culture shock” and subsequently begin to question who they really are and why they are choosing to engage in the challenges confronting them” (p. 69). Cooper, Orrell and Bowden are referring to the experience of students within a work-integrated learning context. However, a sense of destabilisation may also be applicable to
VCAL educators as they learn to teach an unfamiliar curriculum requiring the use of teaching and learning strategies which may contrast with, or unsettle, their previous teaching practices.

While my focus is on the individual learning of the VCAL educators, the context and cultural environment in which educator learning occurs is relevant (Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004). Fiol and Lyles (1985) attempted to clarify the meaning of learning, and how to measure it, in order to theorise organizational learning. While my study is on individual, rather than organisational learning, consideration of the “contextual factors [which] affect the probability that learning will occur” (p. 804) in organisations is still useful. The factors relate to the existing corporate culture and climate, along with structures and strategies which support the uptake of change (Fiol & Lyles 1985, p. 804).

They define culture as manifesting “itself in the overriding ideologies and established patterns of behaviour” in the organisation (Fiol & Lyles 1985, p. 804 citing Martin 1982; Schein 1983). Subsequently if the established patterns of teaching and learning in VCAL provider settings are teacher directed and dependent, it may be difficult for VCAL educators to access learning about applied teaching and learning strategies which place the student and teacher in a learning relationship within which student learning is the focus.

Fiol and Lyles (1985) draw on literature to argue that as culture comprises “shared beliefs” and represents “norms” of the organisation it “can be used to predict the actions taken” (p. 804). Subsequently, in the case of VCAL, it follows that as meaning is mediated through local history and culture, the allocation of resources and materials to the program along with opportunities for professional learning may depend on the way that vocationally related training is perceived within the wider organisation.
Disposition to learning

Billett (2001b) states that “learning is an activity requiring effort” and to complete activities requiring effort requires “strong motivation or interest” (p. 30). He acknowledges work by Perkins et al. (1993) which argued “dispositions ... underpin every cognitive activity” (Billett 2001b, p. 30). Discussion of the impact of educator dispositions on learning follows.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004b) reported from a study they completed on school workplace learning in English secondary schools. One of their findings was that “the teachers’ dispositions and relationships with colleagues appeared to have an important effect on their learning “(p. 167). They had accounted for differences in the wider organisation (which they argued elsewhere as being an influence on learning – see Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004) by comparing two teachers of similar age, career stage, gender and ethnicity within the same school whose relationship with the wider school community was similar. Despite the reducing of variables they found “their approaches to learning and to future carer development are significantly different” (p. 169). They argued this was because of differences in their individual dispositions to learning and career development, combined with those differences that do exist in their positions and status within the school where they work. (p. 169)

In explaining the differences between the two teachers they draw on Bourdieu’s (1984) work on habitus which they describe as a “largely internalised, subconscious battery of dispositions that orientate a person’s actions in any situation” (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004b, p. 75). I interpret this to suggest it is a combination of the immediate cultural context in which individuals exist, along with their life histories, which impact on the way people act, react and learn as they go about their everyday life.

Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004b) go on to argue that this means “[d]ifferent learners perceive the same opportunities differently and react towards them differently” (p. 176), but importantly they also argue that dispositions of
individuals may impact on the opportunities for learning that are created in workplaces. This is an intriguing insight into the potential for workplace learning. While the nature of Hodkinson and Hodkinson’s (2004b) study provided them with the ability to observe and interact with the participants over a number of years, I am reliant on data gathered over an hour or so of conversation. I anticipate that descriptions of participant disposition to learning will be confined to those voiced by the participants themselves.

Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto (2009) examined the receptiveness of vocational teachers to an imposed curriculum reform which impacted on the way vocational teachers managed students as they moved between their vocational school setting and “authentic work environments outside the schools” (p. 15). In the new way of working, the role of the Finnish vocational teacher altered. Vocational teachers now complete less “traditional teaching” in their schools, instead they “increasingly have to guide, evaluate and carry out other duties related to students’ workplace learning” (p. 16). Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto refer to the movement of educators between their teaching setting and the student work placement settings as “border-crossers” (p. 16) in similar style to my description of the everyday work of VCAL educators requiring boundary crossing.

Their study started from several premises, including that educators find educational reforms challenging since “they require a renegotiation of professional identity” (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto 2009, p. 16) and “the implementation of any reform will remain superficial if teachers do not have any sense of ownership in it” (p. 16). They argue that previous studies on reform had focused on mainstream schools and happenings in classrooms and identified knowledge gap as to understanding “vocational teachers’ professional identity negotiations .... [when crossing] ... boundaries between educational and working-life institutions” (p. 16). They drew on work by Sfard and Prusak (2005) to argue an understanding of learning “as a socially situated and culturally shaped
activity” (Vähäsantanen & Eteläpelto 2009, p. 17). They believe therefore that the “major challenge for professional learning in the reform context” is negotiating the space between educators’ “actual and designated identity” (p. 18), that is the difference between the teaching and learning practices they already use and the teaching and learning practices the reform requires them to use. In consideration of literature informing their study, they identified findings that showed flexibility, willingness to adapt, dispositions towards reform and individual belief about what they taught, contributed to positive experiences of reform implementation.

Vähäsantanen and Eteläpelto’s (2009) research questions were focused on teacher identity and their findings included clear identification that educators who were resistant to the reform were concerned about the impact on their job stability, threatened by changing the way they and their students saw themselves as teachers or resistant to changing their teaching and learning practices. Teachers were positive about the change for reasons which included the reform aligning with their own vision for teaching and learning, previous dissatisfaction with the direction of education and their view that teachers worked with students to “create learning opportunities for students” (p. 27).

The implementation of VCAL requires educators to move away from traditional teacher roles in their classroom. The Finnish research accepted that changes in perceptions of identity impact on professional learning. This raises questions for my own research. Does their perception of their teacher identity impact on the professional learning of VCAL educators?

**The impact of individual life experiences**

Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010) who have completed extensive scholarly research and development on workplace learning argue learners “histories of socialization will shape individual” development and this will manifest in “attitudes and approaches towards learning in the workplace environment” (p.
This is also argued by others: (Berlack & Berlack 1981; Freire & Macedo 1996; Goodson 1991; McLaren 1989; Tripp 1987). Subsequently poor education experiences will negatively flavour future ones (Dewey 1938). Some of the influences which affected the type of life experiences individuals may have included “age, race, gender, sexuality, culture, socio-economic background and family background” (Cooper, Orrell & Bowden 2010, p. 69). These are also the influences which will affect the type of learning experience VCAL educators’ students will have. The duality of the influences on both educator and students in their respective roles as learners is particularly important for me to note as I interpret my data because the underlying pedagogical approach of the VCAL program is constructivist in nature and is dependent on the relationship between educator and student. Cooper, Orrell and Bowden (2010) provide caution that the life experiences of both the VCAL educator and their students will impact on the teaching and learning experience they have as a partnership. They argue that life experiences will influence student attitudes to formal and informal learning, ability to develop positive, trusting, respectful relationships, and ability to continue to learn and to share knowledge with others. (p. 69)

It is already known that many of the students who undertake VCAL are disengaged or have a previous negative experience of education (Blake 2009; Blake & Gallagher 2009; Pritchard & Anderson 2006). The schooling experiences of the VCAL educators may predispose them in their selection of teaching and classroom management approaches, at least initially if not throughout their teaching (Hammerness et al. 2005) and affect their disposition in regard to their own learning.

**Summary**

In this chapter I provided a review of literature pertaining to adult learning followed by everyday teacher workplace learning. I then discussed informal and incidental learning followed by learning from experience and reflection. I briefly considered workplace and situated learning, although its relevance to my research is minimal. Learning in communities of practice and teacher
professional development has been discussed. I then reflected on the consequences of existing cultures, or workplace practices and contexts, on learning. I concluded the chapter with consideration of the impact of dispositions and life experiences on individuals’ potential for learning.

In the following chapter I detail the research design and tools which inform my qualitative case study of everyday workplace learning.
Chapter Four– Research Design and Tools

Introduction

This chapter details the research design and tools that inform my qualitative case study of the learning experiences of VCAL educators as they work in a counter cultural learning program. I begin the chapter with a brief reflection on working with methodology, followed by defining the boundaries of the case study. I then detail the research design, tools data collection and conclude with ethical implications and issues arising during the research.

In this research we are all busy bricoleurs

Crotty (1998) indicates both beginning and experienced researchers might “often express bewilderment at the array of methodologies and methods laid out before their gaze” (p. 1). Helpfully Piantanida and Garman (2009) say

In our experience, it is not unusual for students to approach the idea of qualitative research expecting to learn a specific method. Letting go of this expectation is an important step toward entering into the study of qualitative research. It is useful to think of qualitative research as a shorthand descriptor that is used in casual conversation and even in the formal literature to connote a wide range of ideas. (p. 5)

With their words in mind, methodology became for me a journey through blurred boundaries: a creative, reactive place where methodological elements needed to obtain data or reveal findings were considered or discarded. This approach was legitimised for me, when later I read Denzin and Lincoln (1998) who conceptualised “the [qualitative] researcher as [a] bricoleur” building their own framework to both harvest and make meaning out of data (p. 3). In particular they use work from Weinstein and Weinstein (1991, p. 161) who say “the solution (bricolage) which is the result of the Bricoleur’s method is an [emergent] construction” (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 3).

I find this passage apt in relation to my study of VCAL educators’ everyday learning as I consider the applied learning practitioners as “bricoleurs”. This is
because they construct professional knowledge as a result of self-solving problems associated with negotiating boundaries in the form of sociocultural differences, establish professional networks among colleagues and form pedagogical relationships with students. While VCAL educators are provided structure by the VCAA in the form of learning outcomes, they construct the content in response to their students’ needs. Yet they are also limited by the tools and resources, including partnership opportunities, available to support their practice. Subsequently educators cross a range of boundaries as they navigate unfamiliar physical and conceptual places and spaces as they seek and draw together stakeholders to develop learning partnerships, so important to applied learning pedagogies. Applied learning educators are not the only bricoleurs in a discussion of applied learning. Educators’ construction and enacting of curriculum content provides students with opportunities to construct their own learning, forge collaborative relationships with community partners and “build resilience, confidence and self worth” (VCAA 2011b, p. 1).

In this thesis my ongoing search to construct meaning, learning and a scholarly identity results in the creation of my own unique bricolage.

**Defining the case study boundary**

Just as boundary crossing requires fields to be defined, shaping a qualitative case study requires boundaries of the case to be articulated (Edwards & Fowler, 2007; Merriam 2009; Yin 2003a). Merriam (2009) argues that a “case study is an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” and is defined by the uniqueness and limits of the phenomenon being studied (p.40 italics in original). I agree with Stark and Torrance (2005) who highlight defining case boundaries is not “straightforward” (p. 33). That is the case for this study as the “unit of analysis” (Merriam 2009, p. 41) are VCAL educators who work in a number of provider settings. Each provider setting has its own sociocultural difference and practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014). However, the uniqueness the educators share and which provides boundary for my case study is the counter
cultural nature of the VCAL curriculum which they teach. The case being studied is the everyday professional workplace learning of VCAL educators in four differing settings. In doing so I am engaging “with and report[ing] [on] the complexity of social and educational activity” (Chadderton & Torrance 2011, p. 53) that VCAL educators experience while also considering the context within which they teach.

**Qualitative case study**

My investigation of the learning experiences of VCAL Educators focuses on real people, the experiences they bring with them and their current experiences, which is what Denzin and Lincoln (2003) consider the “province of qualitative research … the world of lived experience, for this is where individual belief and action intersect with culture” (p. 12). In my study the everyday learning experiences intersect and are affected by several cultures; the countercultural nature of teaching and learning in VCAL, the practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) of the provider setting, and the meaning perspectives (Mezirow 1990) of the VCAL educators.

I have selected to use an interpretive qualitative case study as it supports my desire to “[d]escribe, understand, interpret” (Merriam 2009, p. 11) and be actively involved in negotiating meaning” (Connole 1993, p. 20) from the data and understanding “what is going on [in] the definition of the situation” (Connole 1993, p. 19 italics in original). Subsequently in this case study I aim to describe and interpret everyday workplace learning experienced by VCAL educators as they use counter cultural teaching and learning strategies which may challenge existing practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014). I am unable forecast to when or where VCAL educator learning occurs or what form it may take. However Yin (2003) argues that in this regard a case study seeking to investigate how educators learn has a “distinct advantage” as a research method when used in “a contemporary set of events over which the investigator has little or no
control” (p. 9). A case study allows me to contextualise the data by explaining “why events or facts appear as they do” (Yin 2003, p. 59).

Merriam (2009) believes that “qualitative researchers are interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 14). A qualitative approach allows me to “stress the socially constructed nature of reality” (Denzin & Lincoln 2003, p. 13) in which VCAL educators work. In particular I am able to examine the sociocultural differences educators observe and experience as they boundary cross from teaching a familiar curriculum to an unfamiliar one. Yin (2012) has argued that understanding the context is “integral to understanding the case(s)” (p. 4) and has also argued elsewhere that to explore situations which are different, “case study is the method of choice” (2003a, p. 1). My consideration of the context in which VCAL programs are provided also supports my construction of meaning from the data (Chadderton & Torrance 2005; Merriam 2009).

Case Study does not limit data collection from one source and benefits from having a range of data sources (Braun & Clarke 2013; Yin 2012). Subsequently I am able to draw on field notes made as I collected data, attended applied learning professional development opportunities and work as an educator in an applied learning pre-service teacher education course. This is legitimised by Denzin and Lincoln (1998) who say

> Qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials – case study, personal experience, introspective, life story, interview, observational, historical, interactional, and visual texts—that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives. Accordingly, qualitative researchers deploy a wide range of interconnected methods, hoping always to get a better fix on the subject matter at hand. (p. 4)

Drawing on a range of data sources provides opportunity to strengthen resultant findings by considering evidence from a number of differing perspectives (Braun
& Clarke 2013) or, as others refer to it, triangulating the data (Yin 2012; Denzin & Lincoln 1998).

My research is contemporary, another characteristic of case study (Yin 2003, pp. 5, 8), as it is an exploration of everyday workplace learning experiences of practicing VCAL educators. Chadderton and Torrance (2011) warn that “it is not possible to generalize from one or a small number of cases to the population under study as a whole” (p. 54) and I do not claim the resultant data will be “statistically representative” (p. 54) of the workplace experiences and learning of all VCAL educators. A case-based position includes explanation of settings and contexts in which learning occurred “to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin 2003, pp. 1,5) and to “illuminate” understanding of a particular issues (Chadderton & Torrance 2011, p. 54). The research provides “in-depth analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam 2014, p. 38), by being able to compare experiences of VCAL educators between sites where VCAL is provided. Chadderton & Torrance (2011, pp. 53-54) also stress the importance that case studies demonstrate depth rather than coverage. Subsequently this research is able to provide a representation of the work of VCAL educators in a range of contexts and settings. As the first significant study of the everyday learning of VCAL educators, it will contribute considerably to understanding how educators learn to teach against the grain (Boomer 1985) of dominant pedagogies.

My case study is interpretative (Merriam 2014, p. 16; Yin 2003a, p. 5). Chadderton and Torrance (2011) argue that providing rich description of the problem before attempting to interpret it is critical. I do this in Chapter Five, Six and Seven by providing a selection of narratives crafted from extracts of data transcriptions in which the voice of the participant dominates. My aim is for VCAL educators to provide their unique experience in their own words. As a result, the narratives also include descriptions of the setting of individual participant’s teaching, characteristics of their student cohort, their past
experiences and how they have mediated from teaching in one curriculum to another. These are all aspects that are able to inform my understanding of the context, practice architectures and meaning perspectives of the participants (Denzin & Lincoln 2003; Kemmis et al. 2014; Mezirow 1990).

An interpretive descriptive case study also suits my research as I consider the learning of VCAL educators against a social historical perspective of vocationally related education and training and the counter cultural nature of the VCAL program. However, it is not a critical qualitative study as my aim is to provide understanding, rather than bring about immediate change (Merriam 2014) although areas for change may be suggested as a result of my study. While I use narrative to present data and discussion, I provide one telling of the data rather than several. I should also make clear that the case study is not phenomenological in nature. While all participants share a common phenomenon, being the experience of learning to teach in VCAL, and my interest is in their “lived experience” (Merriam 2014, p. 24 citing van Manen 1990) I am not concerned with the “essence” of the experience or emotions (Merriam 2014, pp. 25-26) related to the learning experience as much as the nature of the learning experiences themselves.

My study used interviews to capture data. The following explains the rationale and description of selection and use.

**Semi-structured interviews and open-ended questions**

The interviews with participants were guided by open-ended questions. The questions were structured to elicit data on participants’ previous teaching experiences, professional learning and how they learnt to be VCAL educators. A copy of the original research questions is provided in Appendix One. After a number of interviews, I refined my questions in response to emerging themes (or lack of them). The amended interview questions are provided in Appendix Two.
My purpose in choosing to collect data by using open-ended questions was to understand how the VCAL educators interpreted their own experiences (Merriam 2009, p. 14). Each interview was an average duration of one hour. However, some interviews were much less and some much more. Duration frequently depended on the time participants had available for the conversation, their enthusiasm for the topic, the preparedness with which they came to the interview and their engagement with me as the interviewer.

Merriam (2014) suggests that "[o]ne of the goals of the unstructured interview is, in fact, learning enough about a situation to formulate questions for subsequent interviews" (p. 91). This was the case during my own interviews. Each interview informed the next. My growing knowledge of what Merriam called the situation resulted in me being able to more informedly “ask for confirmation of meaning” (Fontana & Frey 2003, p. 61) during the interview. The opportunity to clarify participant meaning in real time meant that using interview as a method of collecting data had an advantage over written surveys or questionnaires. The opportunity to ask for clarification of meaning during the interview did not mean that I did not desire the same opportunity during transcription. Unfortunately I did.

Due to my use of open-ended questions it was no surprise that conversations were not linear. Each interview conversation appeared to take on the form of strangely shaped verbal spirals as educators responded to my questions. During this time, I sourced a quote that reflected my perception of the interviews as circular stories:

> 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)

My follow up questions at the time of the interview, seeking clarification, frequently resulted in conversational tangents where the participant and I found
ourselves discussing issues many thoughts away from the original questions, although still related to the field of VCAL. I have since come to understand that in doing so I had unknowingly become a “coproduc[er] of meaning” (Tanggaard 2009, p. 1510) which means “knowledge produced in ... (my) interview[s] reflects collective and sociocultural discourses” (p. 1510) and may subsequently promote debate about my interpretation. This initially concerned me. However, debate arising from my findings would arguably demonstrate support for my use of a qualitative case study approach which aims to share description and understanding of the learning VCAL educators experience while they teach as Tanggaard (2009) contends that

the main aim of qualitative research interviewing surely is also to fuel dialogues beyond the specific context of the interview setting. (p. 1511)

It is my hope that this research will cause debate and inform further discussion and investigation of the professional learning needed by VCAL educators and the work they do.

The participants and data collection settings

To ensure confidentiality, the specific location and names of providers at which participants worked are not provided; however, some contextual details about the nature of each setting follow. I conducted 27 interviews with VCAL educators who worked in schools (independent and government) (nine), ACE (seven), TAFE (three) and an alternative school (eight) provider settings. The participants were aged between mid-twenties to approximately late 50s years of age. The wide age range of participants was not intentional, but was simply a reflection of the ages of the educators who chose to volunteer their participation. One participant from a school and one participant from an ACE had completed their university teaching qualification the year before the interview. The other 25 participants had been teaching for a number of years before working in the VCAL program (2 – 20 plus years). All participants were qualified to teach VCAL. This means that VCAL educators working in schools and the alternative school had completed teacher education qualifications and were
registered with the Victorian Institute of Teaching (VIT). VCAL educators working in ACE and TAFE had a minimum qualification of a Certificate IV in workplace training and assessment. They may also be qualified teachers and registered with VIT. For ease of reference, the alternative school will now be referred to as PARTNERSHIP.

Pseudonyms are used throughout this thesis to protect participant identity:

- Educators who work in schools have been given an alias starting with ‘S’.
- Educators who work in ACE have been given an alias starting with ‘N’.
- Educators who work in TAFE have been given an alias starting with ‘T’.
- Educators who work in PARTNERSHIP have been given an alias starting with ‘P’.

A list of participants’ pseudonyms, by sector, is provided in Appendix Three.

Each interview provided information, not only about the educators’ VCAL work, but also about other work they undertake as an educator. Participants also describe vagaries of the sectors in which they worked.

The delivery, curriculum and assessment of all VCAL programs are overseen by the VCAA on behalf of the Victorian Minister for Education (VCAA 2011). All participants in this research were either currently working, or had worked, in VCAA registered providers of VCAL. The following provides brief detail about each setting.

**Schools**
In Victoria, high school caters for students in year seven (approximately 12 years of age) to year 12 (approximately 18 years of age). Attendance at school is compulsory until the completion of year 10. From year 10 (approximately 15 years of age) young people must be in education, training or employment until they reach 17 years of age (State Government Victoria 2015). VET, VCAL and VCE
pathways are generally undertaken in years 11 and 12 although some schools offer introduction to senior years’ programs at year 10.

Eight participants were currently working in schools situated in rural and regional Victoria, while one participant had been working in VCAL programs in metropolitan schools. Two schools in which participants worked were independent and four were government.

**Adult Community Education (ACE)**
There are ACE providers throughout Australia, however governance and purpose of each ACE differs from state to state. In Victoria, ACE providers are situated in a wide variety of community settings and offer learning opportunities to adults. Learning is inclusive, flexible and responds to the needs of the locality and its population. Programs offered by ACE providers can range from hobby or interest (flower arranging) to employment qualifications (classroom integration aide). Adults from “all backgrounds and education levels” are encouraged to participate (ACEVIC 2015, para two). Many who undertake VCAL programs in ACE are early school leavers, or those who were unable to engage with mainstream schooling.

Seven participants worked in ACE VCAL programs. The participants were distributed across three ACE providers which were situated in Victorian rural, regional and metropolitan areas. One ACE setting was a large rural provider delivering a range of programs to both adult and youth clients. Another ACE setting was a large regional provider delivering a range of education and vocational programs to youth and adults, specifically targeting young people who were disengaged from school. The provider had a large VCAL team. The third ACE setting was in metropolitan Melbourne delivering a range of education, vocational and community programs to youth and adults. At the time of data collection the VCAL program was relatively small. The participants also taught in other programs outside the provider setting.
Technical and Further Education (TAFE)
TAFE providers are distributed throughout Australia and provide the majority of Australia’s vocational education and training. Nationally accredited vocational courses can be undertaken at TAFE or undertaken as part of an apprenticeship or traineeship. Qualifications awarded on the successful completion of study may range from Certificate I to Masters Degrees and vary from provider to provider. Students at TAFE include secondary school students undertaking a VET certificate as part of their study, early school leavers, those wishing to retrain or upgrade qualifications, and those pursuing an area of interest or hobby.

Three participants worked at a large TAFE provider situated in regional Victoria offering a diverse range of vocational and education programs from Certificate I to Advanced Diploma level to youth and adults.

PARTNERSHIP
PARTNERSHIP was established as a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) providing senior high school and VET qualifications several years after the introduction of VCAL. PARTNERSHIP provides an alternative senior high school pathway for young men and women who may struggle in a school setting, or who like to learn in practical ways. PARTNERSHIP’s VCAL program aligns student learning with an industry in which they are already interested. Students who complete VCAL programs may go on to further education and training in any field or may continue to train or seek employment in careers aligned with their chosen industry. PARTNERSHIP has teaching venues in metropolitan Melbourne, regional and rural Victoria.

Eight participants worked at PARTNERSHIP. At the time interviews were conducted, educators worked alone with their VCAL students for most of the week and attended PARTNERSHIP headquarters one day a week for administrative and professional development purposes which is where and when my interviews were conducted.
**Making the project known**

My cold call approaches to principals via email went unanswered. I took advantage of meetings I attended in the course of my work at a university to make face to face contact with principals and deputy principals. The response was invariably encouraging but voiced as “send me an email”. There was frequently no response to the email and a follow up telephone call was needed. Many of the telephone calls were unsuccessful due to either gatekeepers in the organisation hierarchy or the busy nature of principals’ work. When, by chance, I became aware of VCAL educators who were interested in volunteering their participation, I approached the school/organisation persistently because I knew that there was at least one willing participant behind the administrative protocols.

There are parallels between my experiences in accessing participants and those of Chadderton who expressed her frustration at gaining access to “relevant institution[s] for data” (Chadderton & Torrance 2011, p. 56). Like Chadderton I suggest that “the busy nature of schools and the fact that research tends to be much more important to the researcher than to the researched” (p. 56) impacted my ability to access willing participants.

My original intention was to seek an equal number (10) of VCAL educator participants from each of the settings in which VCAL is delivered (schools, ACE and TAFE). During the process of seeking approval from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) to conduct research in schools DEECD strongly suggested schools should have the largest representation in the participant sample as VCAL was predominately conducted in schools. While this view was acknowledged at the time, the level of interest from schools was not enough to provide the larger representation. As in many research projects, the final sample number of participants from each of the settings was determined by the number willing to participate.
The data collection experience

All participants signed a Plain Language Statement prior to commencement of the interview. All participants provided consent for me to use a Digital Voice Recorder to record our conversations. I personally transcribed all interviews. The first twenty two interviews were completely transcribed. The last five interviews I partially transcribed and partially summarised. By this stage of data collection I had already begun to analyse data, had refined my questions as a consequence and was clear about the emerging themes that responded to the research questions.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) argue that it is useful for the reader to understand the “complex and cumbersome” aspects of interviewing as a data collection method as it “lend[s] a tone of realism and veracity to studies” (p. 88). The process of data collection was not perfect. One interview was originally and mutually agreed to be conducted in two parts, the first interview addressing a selection of questions and then six months later when the participant had been teaching in VCAL for a further period of time, finalised by addressing the remaining questions. The reason for serialisation of the interview was the participant was new-to-VCAL. The participant and I agreed that to revisit the conversation after their further experience of teaching in VCAL would be useful to both the participant as a reflexive process and my data. The interview was never completed and I was reluctant to be too forceful in following up finalising the conversation in case permission to use the first interview was revoked.

Two interviews were cut short as the participants had other commitments; despite following up contact those interviews were never completed. One of the interviews had only gone for a short period of time before the participant needed to leave. The other interview had gone for a lengthy amount of time and the semi-structured nature of the questions, in this instance, had so far worked against useful data gathering. In both cases I was again reluctant to be too
persistent in asking to complete the interview as I did not want the participants to revoke the data I had already collected.

**Field notes**

It was important to me to understand the environment of VCAL educators. Taking field notes assisted me to both describe the problem and understand its context (Merriam 2014; Ryan & Bernard 2003; Denzin & Lincoln 1998). Along with making notes during interviews, I also made notes after attending professional development events such as annual VALA conferences and sessions for new to VCAL educators. By participating in professional development learning contexts with VCAL educators I was able to identify potential boundary crossing objects, interact with VCAL educators, listen to stories from their workplaces and participate in Discourse (Charteris 2016) relevant to the field.

**Analysing and presenting the data**

Tanggaard (2009) holds that “researchers do not conduct interviews to determine whether the meaning expressed in an interview actually corresponds to events that have really occurred” (p. 1500). He goes on to say that “participants in an interview study” are not all telling the same story as “each participant can talk with different voices because narratives are dialogical and multivoiced” (p. 1501). As a result my focus was not so much on what participants said, as what they chose to talk about during the interview. I used thematic analysis to distil themes from the data.

**Distilling the themes**

Thematic analysis provided me with the opportunity to move from being a passive participant in the study to an “active” participant by identifying and selecting relevant to my research questions (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 80). Braun and Clarke (2006) argue that thematic analysis “offers an accessible and theoretically flexible approach to analysing qualitative data” (p. 77).
I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006) suggestion of taking time in transcription as "[it] is not wasted, it informs the early stages of analysis" (p. 88). During the process of listening to and transcribing the data, I made notes for later reference. Braun and Clarke (2006) warn against using interview questions as a sorting mechanism to create themes from the data and I subsequently took the advice of Yin (2012) who advocates starting the process of analysis by considering data relating to the research questions.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) argue “[y]ou know you have found a theme when you can answer the question, what is this expression an example of” (p. 87). As my overall research question was to investigate how VCAL educators learn to be VCAL educators, I also identified key themes by considering whether they “capture[d] something important in relation to the overall research question” (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82) rather than how many times the theme was mentioned.

Ryan and Bernard (2003) acknowledge that themes evolve from several sources, the data and the researcher’s “prior theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study” (p. 88). My open-ended interview questions were originally categorised into themes constructed from my prior understanding of VCAL educators’ work, gained from reading and discussions. Like Ryan and Bernard (2003) however, I did not "anticipate all the themes that [would] arise [from] ... analyzing the data (p. 88 citing Dey 1993: 97-98). Ryan and Bernard (2003a) indicate that the process of identifying themes “forces the researcher to make judgments about the meanings of contiguous blocks of text” (p. 274). A consequence of my selection of transcription text is that my thesis tells only one story from the data.

As will be seen later some data simultaneously relates to a number of themes. This is not uncommon (Braun & Clarke 2006). Due to richness, quantity and breadth of the collected data, the comments generally have only been included
with one theme. The fact that interview comments by participants are relevant across a number of themes reinforces the real and complex nature of teaching.

**Narrative representations**
Braun and Clarke (2006) advocate that in selecting a method of writing up a thematic analysis choose a style which “tell[s] the complicated story of your data in a way which convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (p. 93). Subsequently my challenge was, as Edwards and Fowler (2007) express so well “[h]ow do [I] language into being that which [I] want to represent?” (p. 107). As case study is “richly descriptive” (Merriam 2009, p. 16), narrative provides an obvious choice of method to provide context and describe the experiences of participants. A narrative approach also supports the inclusion of data in participants’ own words. While I acknowledge that I bring my own subjectivity and interpretation to the data, this approach also allows the reader to form their own opinion of the meaning of the participants’ words (McTaggart 1998). In conveying the learning experiences of VCAL educators to the reader I draw on narrative to proceed in my own way, which Crotty (1998) indicates is not uncommon

> In a very real sense, every piece of research is unique and calls for a unique methodology. We as the researcher have to develop it. (pp. 13, 14)

In my thesis words are used to create a story or narrative about the process of research, the experiences of the participants and the interpretation of the data. My approach is supported by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) who, influenced by Dewey, wrote “experience is the stories people live” and for them “narrative became a way of understanding experience” (p. 2). Additionally Squire, Andrews and Tamboukou (2008) have argued research is often 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. (p. 1)
Subsequently, my use of narrative supports and enhances the qualitative, interpretative approach of the research as “[q]ualitative researchers believe that rich descriptions of the social world are valuable” (Denzin & Lincoln 1998, p. 11). A narrative provides a human perspective of the lived professional experience (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) of VCAL educators. The stories of the educators’ experiences are intended to represent (but not typify) perspectives I identified and are also intended to provide insight into the challenging space that VCAL educators inhabit.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethics approval for the research was sought from the Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University. Approval was granted by HEAG 08/28 dated 30 August 2008. Approval to approach Victorian government schools was sought from the Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development. Approval was granted by SOS004033 dated 12 January 2009.

A modification to the ethics request (to seek participation from schools under the control of the Catholic Education Office) was accepted by Human Research Ethics Committee of Deakin University on 14 June 2010. Approval to approach Catholic schools was sought from the Catholic Education Office. Approval was granted by GE10/009 dated 10 June 2010.

I agree with Clandinin and Connelly (2000) that

> Ethical matters need to be narrated over the entire narrative inquiry process. They are not dealt with once and for all, as might seem to happen, when ethical review forms are filled out and university approval is sought for our inquiries. Ethical matters shift and change as we move through an inquiry. (p. 170)

While many “researchers [might] ... function as if regulatory approval eliminates the possibly of future ethical problems (Lincoln & Cannella 2007, p. 73), for me ethical considerations only started with the application for ethics approval to undertake research with human participants. Ethical considerations were ongoing in the data collection process, for example how many times could I
follow up an incomplete interview before the participant perceives my phone calls or emails as intrusive and are there ethical implications when the identity of educators who choose to participate is known by their workplace colleagues. Ellis (2007) has indicated that researchers must grapple with “the question of how to honour and respect our relationship with intimate others while being true to what we perceive to be the truth of our story” (p. 210). I have certainly grappled with this conundrum. To the best of my knowledge I have respected my relationship with participants.

**Revisiting the research questions and preparing for the data**

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I provide a selection of narratives compiled from participants’ individual interview transcriptions. While conversations with all participants were interesting, it became evident during the process of analysis that not all content was relevant to the research questions in my thesis. The 20 excerpts from 27 data transcriptions provided in the following chapters have been selected as they respond best to the research questions, which are:

- How do VCAL educators learn about VCAL curriculum and facilitating applied learning?
- What consequences does context have on the professional practice or learning of VCAL educators?
- What professional discontinuities or contradictions do VCAL educators experience as they teach VCAL?

The research questions focus on describing and understanding how VCAL educators learn about the VCAL curriculum. In doing so I also aim to determine if there are consequences for the professional practice or learning of VCAL educators due to contextual factors such as the counter cultural nature of VCAL and the perception in which vocational training is held. As I use the concept and language of boundary crossing to answer the research questions, representations of discontinuities, contradictions and continuity are included.
Benzie and Somekh (2012) argue “narrative has always been seen as a core means of learning in, and from, Communities of Practice” (p. 174). In my research the community of practice consists of VCAL educators who use similar pedagogical practices and in doing so experience similar challenges. However I tell individual stories of their experiences. My later analysis of the stories provides opportunity for other stakeholders in VCAL (for example new VCAL educators, school leadership, teacher-educators and policy makers) to become aware of, and learn from, the challenges faced by VCAL educators.

Witherell and Noddings (1991) assert that “[w]hether writer or teller, the narrator of a story provides further meaning – and even further text” (p. 3). I am both the writer and the teller of these stories, but do not own them. In editing individual transcripts into a narrative my emphasis was on allowing the voice of the participant to dominate while providing “sequential order [which] connect[ed] events in a meaningful way” (Gill & Goodson 2011, p. 157). I do this in order to provide both context and rich description (Chadderton & Torrance 2011) from the educator’s own perspective of their everyday work in VCAL. My approach provides one example of “further text” to which Witherell and Noddings refer (1991, p. 3).

Each participant told their own account of working in VCAL in their own way and the focus of the account was determined by their interests, context, challenges and successes. The data resulting from each interview were varied. Consequently while the structure of each narrative differs it still reflects one or more aspects of an individual’s experience of learning to teach and their everyday work in VCAL.

I have organised the narratives into four categories which represent the provider setting of the VCAL educator at the time they were interviewed. The categories are schools, ACE, TAFE and PARTNERSHIP. As will be seen, in some instances the educator refers to their VCAL experiences in a previous context as well as their
current context. For ease of reading, I have further divided the categories of data into three approximately equal parts:

- Stories from VCAL educators in schools – Chapter Five.
- Stories from VCAL educators in PARTNERSHIP – Chapter Six.
- Stories from VCAL educators teaching youth in adult contexts (ACE and TAFE) – Chapter Seven.

**Summary**

In this thesis I use a range of methods to suit both the purpose of the thesis and my own communicative style. The research design was an evolutionary process. According to Vidich and Lyman (1998) this is not unusual and it is frequently “unacknowledged” that “a description of a particular method of research” is a “retrospective account” of what was done in the research process due to the separate nature of data collection from the writing up (p. 42). Like Mooney (2012) I found that “[u]ltimately, the research journey has proven to be a vastly different end product from that which was first postulated” (p. 105).

In this chapter I have detailed the research design and tools which inform my case study. I have reiterated the research questions and introduced the reader to the presentation format of the data.

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I provide a selection of narratives compiled from individual interview transcriptions of selected participants.
Chapter Five: Stories from VCAL educators in schools

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a selection of narratives compiled from VCAL educators who worked in the setting of school. Each of the following participants in this section worked at a different school. A brief overview of the data collection settings were provided in Chapter Four. At the end of the chapter I draw attention to examples of how the narrative extracts inform answering the research questions in relation to the learning, consequences and discontinuities that VCAL experience as they teach.

Sindy: “oh what’s VCAL all about?”

Sindy completed her teaching training at university after leaving school. Since graduating as a teacher she has taught secondary curriculum at both rural and suburban schools. When Sindy spoke to me she was teaching VCAL and VCE at an independent rural/regional school in Victoria.

Sindy had been in her current school for six years. She had taught both VCE and VCAL in the school for six years. The VCAL coordinator had approached Sindy and said I’d love you to teach VCAL. Despite her previous 15 years’ experience as a teacher, Sindy replied Oh what’s VCAL all about? Sindy explained why she thought she had been chosen to teach VCAL

... the coordinator was looking for someone a little bit quirky ... I’m not a disciplinarian ... not everyone can work in VCAL ... I try and build relationships with the kids.

While the VCAL coordinator was supportive of the VCAL program, other staff, including the principal were not necessarily so. When VCAL was first introduced into Sindy’s school she said the principal had been heard to say this will not be a VCAL provider school.
It was not only the principal who thought poorly of VCAL. Sindy related that other staff would often say *oh you’ve got VCAL again you poor thing*. Sindy explains that other staff appeared to have the perception that teaching in VCAL

... is like ‘oh you’ve drawn the short straw or oh I’ve got the applied class again, they don’t think I’m good enough to take the, you know, intelligent bunch blah blah.

On the contrary Sindy’s view was

... as a VCAL teacher I think there is not enough kudos given to VCAL teachers it is like you are teacher’s aide. To me that is the equivalent of your status within the school.

... in my school the VCAL coordinator tries to tailor the VCAL staff to what she thinks the kids need. However the school also puts the best physics teacher in VCE physics etc. and the rest of the teachers get put anywhere so for the VCAL coordinator to get the ‘best’ teacher for the [VCAL]students that person needs to ‘battle’ a bit.

Sindy explained that the VCAL students were also frequently forgotten by the school, providing an example that occurred during the annual school photos for year 12. She said *they’ll make an announcement over the PA “VCE class for the photos” with no mention of the VCAL class*. At other times year 12 photos had been scheduled when the VCAL students were away from the school, for example at VET study or on work placement.

The learning environment and resources for VCAL students was also perceived by Sindy as poor, Sindy explained

... VCAL is in the ‘shed’ which we share with the woodwork teacher. We have computers but no heaters, it is well resourced as far as Textas [felt tipped pens] and white board markers and every student has a computer. But the structure is like an afterthought. I shouldn’t complain as some schools don’t have that much. I hate the classroom.

Sindy appears to have a natural pedagogical disposition to the type of teaching and learning approaches used in VCAL. While Sindy was not aware of the VCAA principles of applied learning until speaking with me in her interview, the descriptions she provided of her pedagogical practices aligned with student
learning centred constructivist teaching and learning approaches. Some
examples she provided are

... we do lots of group work and we take on board a lot of primary school
ideas. I try and build relationships with the kids.

... I’ve been driving to work and I think that I’m going to go to the
newsagents and buy five dirt bike magazines and one on fishing and one
on animals[to align with her students’ interests] – sound’s really
embarrassing – but that’s me – I went up there and bought that. Or I’d
buy three Herald Suns, three AGEs and an Australian [all are Australian
daily newspapers] and they’d all go for the Herald Sun, but that doesn’t
matter ... I don’t care, doesn’t matter, as long as they are reading.

... we watch things as well – We watched ‘go back to where you came
from’ on SBS [Australian television station]. They love watching stuff. We
read relevant stuff that they like – I read to them. We read the book
about the women who lost her legs in the London bombing as part of a
unit on survival stories.

Sindy, like all the participants in my research, frequently referred to her student
cohort and it was evident that her practice was centred on her students’ learning
needs. The year Sindy spoke to me, she had five VCAL students who had five
different learning needs. The year before she had 19 students and 19 different
learning needs to which she needed to adapt curriculum content.

... [they are a] very eclectic bunch – we have the punk rocker, very diverse
bunch of kids. It is very much listening to the kids and taking a lead from
them. They like computers.

... they are still often the kids who have been lost in the system and are
the kids with problems such as dysgraphia. As far as literacy goes – a lot
of them are bordering on being illiterate because schools have let them
down – in some ways we are still are like Victorian England. We still stick
kids on chairs and tables and have someone up the front.

... you have to read them [the students] on the day and you have to
choose the fights you pick.
Sindy identified a range of skills she would like to acquire to support her VCAL practice. Most of these skills were related to dealing with her diverse cohort of students.

... I feel like a parent sometimes – one of those kids was living with his Uncle - I feel like bringing him home, giving a decent meal and nurturing him. One boy was quite aggressive and upset he missed out on an apprenticeship and he pushed down the letter box of his potential employer – I would like to have had better skills to deal with that.

... I would like to have negotiating skills – I’m all the time trying to entice them to do work.

... a psychologist at times or counsellor – you know boyfriend and girlfriend break up, that is hard, or listening to their friendship issues.

... we have a girl with a tumour who has short concentration periods and we have devised a program specifically for her. I don’t feel very prepared to deal with her. Poor VCAL teachers we do get “it’s too much for her to do VCE so we’ll stick her in VCAL” but then there is a lack of understanding on my part how those drugs for the tumour might be affecting her personality or memory. So we deal with not only behavioural problems, not only learning issues but also health issues [dysgraphia, ADHD, physical disabilities].

When I asked Sindy how prepared she was to teach VCAL she replied thank goodness I had 15 years of teaching. She would have preferred some specific preparation. For example she would like to go to some seminars on VCAL or see what people are doing at other schools. She also suggested that to buddy someone and shadow teach at another school would be useful for her VCAL teaching practice.

... I don’t have a psychology degree I have just muddled my way through it. As a coordinator at another school we did do team building of dealing with difficult parents (which I do draw on).

... I draw on being a parent – that has been the big thing especially as my son has been diagnosed with Asperger’s – and I use that. I get advice from the school counsellor (without breaching privacy) or the coordinator.
Chapter Five: Stories from VCAL educators in schools

or the tutor teacher – I draw from these things to compensate for a lack of structured training.

... You really have to work well with the coordinator of VCAL and you are part of a team with the students.

... I would like to be sent on some courses to do with the principles of applied learning [to which I had just introduced her] to formalise in my mind, I have been teaching long enough to understand what these particular kids like, but I would like to go away and have a structured introduction to applied learning theory and practical suggestions. It would be good to do something on-line perhaps.

Sindy articulated clear differences between teaching in VCAL and her other teaching. In Sindy’s VCAL classroom her students represent a greater concentration of a range of learning needs and so her teaching strategies need to be individually tailored. In her VCE classroom a collection or range of teaching strategies will suffice. She believes the VCE is curriculum driven.

... in VCE geography I walk into the classroom knowing the assessment tasks, in VCAL I don’t. While we try to differentiate in delivering VCE content we don’t/ can’t in regard to the VCE assessment tasks and SACs [School Assessed Coursework]. In VCAL I can differentiate the delivery of the content and the assessment task. The VCAL program allows the students to generate their own testing. In the past I have asked them to design an assessment template as part of their project (for example a Riding for the disabled project) so they can understand how they can be marked as competent from the learning process.

Sindy says she comes out of one classroom talking to her students in one way and into a VCAL classroom where there are different cultural markers in the conversation

... I wouldn’t talk to my year 7s like I talk to the VCAL class, mind you I don’t want to be their best friend, but at the end of the day I think you have to be more relaxed around them because really they could be out in the workforce – they could be working with me in a café serving coffee or whatever – so I sort of have to respect that as well.
... it is not me up the front saying things like “get your foot off that table” it is more “everyone how was your weekend – oh Thomas you wouldn’t do that at home would you” – so it is always the way you talk to them.

It is clear that Sindy is a reflective practitioner. During the interview she is open about saying that when her VCAL activities miss the mark she thinks it is often because she is in her VCE mode or did not plan it properly – or read the group as well as she could have.

... I might have gone in there thinking ‘oh I’m really interested in this, I’m going to do it today, even if it kills me. If it doesn’t work, sometimes it can be where they are at as well, they are the troublesome kids, they’ve been naughty all the way through secondary school, they are the kids on uniform detentions, the kids on academic detentions, they have got really low self-esteem. It might sound cliché but it is so true, they just fall into that group. Often their personal appearance they are not out there winning popularity competitions. There are some great kids though, but they don’t fit into that mould. Sometimes they have brought their baggage to class and I could have done the most amazing lesson and it would have gone pear shaped anyway.

Sindy did not believe that all teachers were suited to working in VCAL saying I don’t think everyone can teach VCAL.

Sara: “it was horrendous, it was horrendous”

Sara taught VCAL in a secondary school in a large rural town. She had retired and moved to the town and returned to teaching when she wanted work. Her workload is full time and ongoing and includes VCAL and some middle years’ curriculum.

Sara is a qualified teacher, has a Masters degree in Special Education and qualifications in ESL (English as a Second Language) and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages). She has worked in adult education and has also been a social worker. Her social work involved working with young people on probation or as they moved through the court system. For most of her teaching career she has worked with special needs young people. Sara clarified that her
experience of special needs meant working with students who had significant learning disabilities. She had also worked teaching Aboriginal youth. Her work in secondary schools has been in both the public and private sector. She summarises her career focus as

... from aboriginal communities to schools and primary school. Differentiating curriculum to enable children of all different abilities to access the material, so that has been my background to come into this - actually it has been very helpful

In describing her pathway into VCAL Sara comments that she really was an example of

... falling into VCAL. A teacher left and I just happened to be in the right place at the right time. I had never heard of it at all and I hadn’t taught year 11 and 12 before, well not consistently. Most of my work had been done in middle school. I went on an extremely steep learning curve staying about half a lesson in front of the students for a while, trying to work out what on earth I was doing, I had no idea, but I learnt pretty quickly.

Sara spoke about the challenges she faced despite being an experienced teacher. She had no professional development as to how to teach the VCAL program, as emphatically explains

... NONE – not one single scrap I drew on my own learning strategies ...I took it on knowing that I would have to prepare myself.

... I had no content. I had the teaching strategies probably in place and I was used to engaging kids who were completely disengaged. But I had no content. It was HORRENDOUS, it was horrendous. I was stressed out of my head. My background is literacy and I had never heard of work related skills ... (laughs). I didn’t understand the curriculum at all - I had no idea about [senior years schooling] in this state and it was very difficult. Nobody knew anything.

At this point in the interview Sara describes some particular circumstances in her school which resulted, at that time, in a lack of school support and lack of school knowledge about the VCAL. While that particular information was “off the record” Sara was happy to go “on the record” with her description of how she overcame her own, and the school’s lack of knowledge about VCAL. The
following is lengthy but necessary to encapsulate the context, Sara’s actions and the results.

... the [school] administration thought they knew a lot about [senior years] schooling and they certainly knew more than me, [that] wasn’t hard! They had no concept of the content – not a jot – and there was a staff member who knew a little bit.

... I did a very pragmatic thing – I looked at it [her problem of teaching in VCAL] and I thought I have got 12 kids here who were out of control – they were unreal – the first thing I have to do is survive. ’I’d just had surgery and I thought my issue here is to survive this and to present something that is professional and engaging to keep these kids under control. I had done a lot of project work in the past with my special needs kids and with community service organisations in private schools ... [so I was used to connecting to the community] and I was very used to working on project work – you know real applied learning stuff. So I thought, I had brief overview and I had a talk to all these people that were supposed to know everything but believe me I have since discovered know nothing and from all that I just picked out what I could. It sounds very ad hoc but it was all I could do to survive and I figured that these kids had to do a project. If we did nothing else we [would have] got through a project [and we would have] actually developed some work related skills. So I went back to the kids and I asked them ‘what would you really like to do, if we are going to do a project what would you like to do’? The kids came up with the idea of XXXXXX [the idea is quite unique and potentially could identify participant]. It just happened that one of the lasses in the group was very artistic and the boys were unbelievable – so we all set off to do this – we had no money not a cent - not a single cent – I had no budget – I had nothing, nothing – it was horrendous – fortunately the [community partner] person was amazing she was great. The kids, once they realised that we could actually do this and that we were going to bumble along whether they liked it or not actually began to fall into line. I actually had to skill these kids to go into the community and beg and borrow materials.

... it was an amazing experience ... these kids who could barely throw two words together were all dispatched to beg and borrow in the community ... ‘yeah’... ‘grunt’... (Sara and Christine both laugh) ... oh lord ... and I had no way of keeping them to the [community space] I have got a really small car and I used to make two or three trips to ferry these kids to [community space] two or three times a week ... it was just ... [Sara was dealing with quite challenging students on her own] ... they were under threat of death. I said to them if you so much raise your eyebrows I’ll skin, I’ll scalp you and they were left with various jobs to do and they all had to work out their own jobs and when it didn’t work I said ‘well it serves you
right’ I have no idea how to saw, paint, hammer in a nail – I don’t even know what a hammer looks like – so the boys all felt terribly clever because they all knew a great deal more than me.

... my husband is retired and he did lots of ferrying of materials and buying of materials and just ... supportive – so between the two of us ... and my son who is an education student. [Husband name] would come along and patch up the bits that weren’t right – it was just an amazing experience. These kids all had to hammer and saw and nothing fitted and nothing was square and they had to go and beg and borrow lino [linoleum] and anyway the upshot was this amazing renovation which turned into something bigger than Ben Hur and got into the paper and we had openings and the kids all gave me bouquets and it was just an amazing experience. We all emerged from the end of it – I had aged about 25 years. I don’t know how it met the curriculum because ... I had no idea what I was doing and my daughter who is a teacher [overseas] came back and she helped [write it up to QA] so it was thanks to my family I became a VCAL teacher at the very beginning.

... You know every one 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.

Sara was quite clear that her previous experience played an important part in her successful implementation of the project based approach to VCAL. She clearly stated

... I have to say Christine if I hadn’t been a very experienced teacher with a fairly strong work ethic this would never have worked ... taking over that group last year and then driving it this year – if you put someone else ... [young teacher or other] ... who had no ideas they would have been in a terrible mess.

After describing her approach to her first experience of teaching in VCAL Sara asked me to keep in mind that she had been working in remote Australia for many years where she had to be innovative and resourceful. For example, sometimes she could not get to school as roads were cut and she couldn’t wade across due to snakes.
Sara would have preferred to know a great deal more about the curriculum before she started to teach in VCAL. For example, what was the purpose of the VCAL Skills Strands, how to map content to outcomes and how to provide suitable evidence for assessment purposes. Sara described how has taken control of her own learning since her first experience of VCAL

... at the end of last year. I had the six months of floundering around and I realised pretty quickly what I needed. I had a good background – I had ESL I had adult learning I had applied learning – I had developmental learning and I had a strong background in boys’ learning because I had been at a boys school for the last 10 years – and most of these kids are boys and that has been very useful – all that background in boys education. At the end of last year I realised that I need to get a really good handle on the outcomes, I needed to understand this community and how they could help. I joined Rotary I did a few things like that so that I could get a handle on what this community is about.

The perception by teachers, students and parents of VCAL in Sara’s school had been very low and Sara was determined that should change. She comments

... I am not allowing that to happen. This year I have kept very careful records since I worked out what has got to happen. I have kept portfolios of these kids work so through that everything is highly defensible. It is a professional sort of presentation, because having worked in special needs in so many schools where there is no credibility for special needs you actually have to raise the profile and sell it in terms of making it look good as well as doing really good stuff. More and more [students are coming into VCAL who could actually choose whichever stream they wanted to do]. And I think it is really the way of the world. Parts of this school have resisted terribly – they are really angry about the loss of academic focus but you know with the increasingly privatising of education, post compulsory schooling is the way these government schools, particularly here, is going to go – because we are drawing on a very low socio-economic demographic – very. There is massive community problems, though the more endowed are going to the [local Christian school] which is just about bursting at the seams [with the remainder] coming here.

... well I think it[VCAL] should be regarded highly in its own right. It should be sufficiently moderated, well moderated, so that a particular standard is required. The attitude here is that anyone should pass VCAL. In fact anyone shouldn’t pass VCAL because you require quite a strong level of independence to get through VCAL
Sadie: “well I wasn’t very prepared at all”

Sadie commenced her teaching training after leaving school, but took a year’s break during the course before completing her teaching qualification. She has Physical Education, Environmental Science and Outdoor Education as her method areas. When Sadie spoke to me she had been teaching for a total of 1 year and 9 months and was working in an independent school. Sadie started at her school as a new teacher and new to VCAL.

She received an information package in the mail before she started teaching at her school and was offered a range of professional development opportunities in her first year after she had first started teaching VCAL. Sadie said that she was selected to teach in VCAL due to the school’s entrenched view of VCAL as a bit of a dumping ground for teachers and students, I was the new one, I got VCAL.

Despite completing her teacher training several years after the introduction and establishment of VCAL as a choice in senior years’ Victorian curriculum, Sadie commenced teaching VCAL feeling that I wasn’t very well prepared at all. She began teaching VCAL and then started attending VCAL professional development opportunities. She believes that her training in Outdoor Education also assisted her VCAL teaching as it incorporates experiential learning, applied learning, group dynamics and leadership styles. Despite the professional development Sadie still struggled with the concept of applied learning, she said

... 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 ...

Sadie’s diverse cohort of students provide a number of challenges for her teaching, in particular maintaining focus on addressing many different student abilities at the same time as preparing content for the three levels of VCAL she addresses in the one class. She comments
... I have a young girl who is actually doing probably best in the program but she has an intellectual disability so she did foundation [while the rest did] intermediate.

... I have some students that struggle academically and others who have the academic ability to be able to do very well in VCE. These students are doing VCAL for whatever reason, which is fine, but I give them maths/numeracy stuff to do and they are finished in five minutes so you are trying to extend them while you teach foundation and then you have got the middle group and then there is a certain point... ... (Sadie’s voice trails off). So I guess class sizes impact to a certain degree when you are trying to individually teach.

Sadie considered that, for her, more preferable preparation for teaching VCAL would be to go and see VCAL programs in other schools, in particular observe numeracy classes

... because on your [pre-service teaching placement] rounds you always get to observe classes before you actually DO.

She had never seen how a VCAL class should work before being employed at her school. Importantly she would have liked to have known

... how to scaffold the whole VCAL program so that by the end of the VCAL they [students] are working independently because you can’t expect the ones [students] that have just come into year 11 to have the skills [to complete the program]

Foremost among the skills Sadie would like to have in her professional toolkit, before she began to teach in VCAL is project management. She explained

... in order to help them manage a project I need to know how to do it and how to facilitate it properly which is — with that fundraiser — one of the things that I think went wrong.

Sadie would also like conflict de-escalation, motivation and communication skills. Sadie also expressed a desire for particular strategies around managing applied learning lesson preparation that then

... go somewhere else and you end up doing other things (which is quite appropriate in VCAL).
In my conversation with Sadie it became apparent that as a new or beginning teacher a key challenge was knowledge and experience in adopting inquiry based pedagogies. Sadie commented

... trying to get my head around implementing Inquiry Based Learning and how to create an inquiry with a group of students, let it go whenever it needs to go but still meet the outcomes within the time constraints ... If I spend a whole term on something but only meet one outcome – how is that going to affect the rest of the year?

Sadie explained that she found it helpful in VCAL to draw on her skills of budgeting, using public transport, time management, being flexible, and adaptable. She also uses discussion with colleagues as a learning mechanism. She uses the internet, visual resources given her by another staff member, draws on community projects and links in to initiatives of which well-known personalities might be the public face.

Sadie found that resources left by her predecessor were not particularly useful and resulted in Sadie’s sort of teaching year nine mathematics to the students. However Sadie indicated it was not applied, and it was not really numeracy and the students hated it. Her response to her dilemma was to

... pretty much make it up as I went along and I mainly went to numeracy VCAL professional development rather than general VCAL and just got ideas from talking to other people

Sadie indicated that in her school the previous leadership in VCAL had not been strong (her school had a new coordinator at the time we spoke). The new coordinator was trying to raise the image of VCAL. Sadie also highlighted a quandary that when disengaged students are enrolled in VCAL they can contribute to the program’s lack of esteem as

...they [the students] expect to be held in esteem and VCAL is a valid pathway, yet they don’t respect the rules of the school and are not committed to the program.
There was other evidence that the VCAL program had not been valued by the school in relation to resources and timetabling. Sadie described the resources she was using

... the classroom is disgusting but that is being changed. It is hot, upstairs, too small, stuffy and the windows don’t open properly. It is not very nice.

When I asked why she had that classroom she replied; it has just has always been the VCAL classroom [as it] was near the special needs department but it is also near the careers office.

Sadie believes her school structure devalues VCAL in as much as VCAL appears to be treated as a year level rather than a learning area. She believes if VCAL was regarded as a learning area within the school curriculum hierarchy there would be an allocation of planning time on a regular basis where teachers could meet and share what they are doing in their teaching and how it might relate to other lessons so that integration of learning can occur. She feels that VCAL being treated as a year level results in discussion, at staff year level meetings, of student concerns rather than curriculum/content. A current issue frustrating Sadie was a lack of communication between teachers to link or align their teaching content. For example when she is told by another teacher they are going to include certain content in their lessons, Sadie prepares to build on those concepts or content in her own lesson. Unfortunately she has arrived in her own lesson to find that the other teacher has not included the content and has not told her that it was not included. Valuing VCAL as a learning area, would, in her opinion, overcome the communication and collaboration issues.

Sadie had taken the time to consider the interview questions and reflect on ways the school could provide better support to the VCAL program before her interview. It was evident the school privileged the timetabling of VCE over the timetabling of VCAL. Sadie taught two periods of VCAL on Mondays and two periods on Fridays. Monday and Friday the timetable worked on an ‘assembly’ timetable which meant that each school period lost 10 minutes to ‘make’ time
Sadie described a current situation where four or five different teachers have moved through a VCAL skills strand teaching area which resulted in very little transference of knowledge as the paperwork was handed on with words such as *here is all the stuff*. Subsequently organisational knowledge about VCAL did not increase as planning started from scratch each time new teachers began teaching in VCAL.

When we finished the interview, the last words that Sadie spoke before I turned the digital recorder off were

... *it is good to vent, like a debrief, I had them today and they were driving me insane, but I am definitely learning as I go now.*

**Sue: “I reckon I have learnt best as I have been doing it”**

Sue had been teaching for seven years. She had obtained an arts degree qualification at university after completing year 12. She then worked in unskilled employment and saved up to go overseas. While overseas she was employed as a nanny. She returned to Australia, had a family and enrolled in university to complete a two year post graduate primary/secondary teaching degree. Sue also has a Master’s qualification in special needs. Her first year teaching was spent doing Contract Relief Work in secondary schools; she then had a second
child and a year’s break before applying for a teaching position at a special needs school where she had spent the last six years. She explains her pathway to VCAL … [teacher name] who was here and the other teacher in the program were the ones who took on VCAL at the school and created it all and when they needed another staff member [in the school] I applied for the job and I was the only applicant that had, well, the most suitable applicant that really had some sort of knowledge [of VCAL] … possibly during my interview they did ask me if I knew something about VCAL and I was able to say that I had I did know about it because I had, you know done a PD [professional development session] in my final year of teaching so I understood that it existed and that is about it.

When asked about her preparation for VCAL Sue replied nothing at all during my teacher education training, I reckon I have learnt best as I have been doing it. When I asked what she drew on in her ‘learning by doing’ approach Sue replied … probably my own life experience and the knowledge of the experts around me. I have gone back to hands on stuff, because I don’t care how old kids are they are still happy if they are cutting and pasting. Nothing I learnt at uni [university] has anything to do with the real world. I can look back now and connect the dots, but it was more about what I have learnt as I go, life experience and talking to other people that’s prepared me for it [teaching in VCAL].

Sue believes that good support from other VCAL teachers is very important, as she explained … the support of other teachers who have been doing it and doing it because they want to do it. You can go to some meetings and get together with groups of people and [some say] ‘oh yeah I do it but whatever’. Support and advice from people that are in it for the right reasons would be the easiest way to say it.

At Sue’s school there is a lot of in-school professional development, but not specifically VCAL related. When there is VCAL professional development her teaching team tries to ensure that at least one member goes so they can then
share it with each other. If she had to source professional development on her own Sue indicated

... I wouldn’t do it – there is not enough time in the day for what you have to do, never mind chasing your PD [professional development].

Sue and her colleagues appear to use their own agency as a team to consider organisational learning and succession planning to teach VCA. She described the value of this collaboration

... I was really lucky to come in with these two teachers and I supported them and I learnt the subject and every year we swap our subjects around so we have all become experts.

Importantly Sue and her team also have support from their leading teacher in building capacity of their VCAL program. The leading teacher had the view that there was no value for the VCAL program in splitting their team up. As Sue explained

... that is one thing about our school, most schools have a process, they like to swap their teachers around every two or three years. Well this is the sixth year we have all been together in this same team and every year we think ‘they are going to split us up this year’ and I thought – well we don’t want to be split up because this is what we know and XXX has always said (being our leading teacher) that we are a bit different – we are a specialised area – you can’t just bring people in because they have to learn the whole thing. She said ‘you guys have just got to the point of where we know all the subjects and it has taken us that many years to pick it all up’. She has fought for that every year to keep us there so that the program keeps running smoothly. I suppose a lot of schools don’t do that. They just put new people in every year as people want to get out – so it DOES discredit the program, but she is so for the program she has fought every year to keep us here.

However Sue indicates that is not the case in all schools.

... yeah I hear horror stories every year when I go to QA [Quality Assurance] about all these teachers and every year we go through the QA process there is new faces because every year new teachers are slotted in [to teach in VCAL].
As a result of her experiences at Quality Assurance and speaking to other teachers, Sue had the view that one reason for the frequent turnover of teachers in VCAL was due to the difference between teaching in VCAL and other curriculum

... I feel really sorry for people who have been teaching main stream secondary school and get put into VCAL because they are trying to adapt the VCAL curriculum by trying to teach it the VCE way or the mainstream way and I think that you just can’t do it.

... [our group] here understands the process and how to write it up – other people get thrown into it and don’t have a clue.

... [applied learning] is not just filling in sheets and I think that teachers who have been teaching one way for 20 odd years can’t just slot straight over.

... I think it takes a certain personality type to [to teach VCAL].

Sue had observed that not all new to VCAL teachers fully understood the curriculum planning approach required to support student-centred learning

... I was at QA [Quality Assurance] last year and a new provider who was doing numeracy was there. As they were a new [VCAL] provider they started at foundation numeracy. This woman had her whole years plan and said ‘oh it is just so basic – we shouldn’t have had to do foundation’. This lady had created numeracy as if she was teaching VCE numeracy. ‘Oh’ she goes ‘I just got them to do a series of worksheets to cover the eight outcomes and that was it – so how hard can that be?’

... I explained how we are lucky to get through our foundation numeracy in a year, because it is massive. We cover every topic so many different ways that there is no way the students could not understand it.

From her participation in Quality Assurance panels Sue drew the following conclusions

... as far as I am concerned, if you pass them on VCAL they have to understand it. We have 15 kids in the class – here we have to present every idea in 15 different ways to make sure they have all got it. I believe that is not just about having the evidence at the end it is about the process you have gone through to get them there.
A key challenge that Sue highlighted was the difficulty in keeping her resources ‘fresh’ by sourcing contexts or examples around which to build applied learning opportunities.

... You can’t walk into education supplies shop and find any books or work sheets or things, there is nothing – you have to make everything yourself or create everything yourself so yeah any chance we may find or get something new – yes – we grab onto it ... I redo my resources every year because the kids are different or I need to redo the worksheet as it didn’t actually make sense to the kids – so we do like to see how other people have done it.

When I listen to Sue speak about her day to day teaching practice I identify an ongoing embracing of action research (Plan, Act, Observe, Reflect) to improve, change modify or reflect on her teaching. I mention this constant evaluation of her own work and Sue replies

... Yeah, that is DEFINITELY what we do – we have all done it – even [the member of the team] who has been here the longest and would just love to retire. You see so many teachers who go through saying ‘I don’t even care’ I am going to do whatever as long as I can read the paper today I don’t care what they [students] do.

**Sally: “there is no preparation for VCAL teachers and I think that is a real shame”**

Sally was teaching in a regional rural school when she spoke to me. She was the VCAL coordinator who also taught VET components of the VCAL. Sally’s teaching load also included VCE and middle years’ subjects. Sally went straight from school to teacher training in university and to secondary school teaching. Sally also has special education qualifications and experience as a welfare coordinator.

Sally described herself as a teacher who had always been

... interested in students who have not been able to achieve fully in a school, that has been my love.
As far as preparation for teaching in VCAL, Sally said

... there is no preparation for VCAL teachers and I think that is a real shame. Every so often they do an in service and touch base but…. I hand pick my VCAL teachers though. 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. I try hand pick the teachers that are interested in this area, but as far as professional development, there is virtually not a lot around, it is a real indictment on the system that is there is not a lot of professional development or training.

Sally had formed the view that schools could be more strategic in employment of staff who were suitable to teach VCAL. She inferred that schools tend to employ straight academic people and not want to employ for this area [VCAL] which she referred to as hands on learning.

Sally argued that VCAL teachers need skills to be able to adapt to both the pedagogical approach of the curriculum and the student cohort, she explained

... these kids are rambunctious sort of kids ... but to me they are also highly intelligent a lot of the time and they are very resourceful. When they are set a task to do that we might think is quite difficult they can actually run with it reasonably well ... but you have to have teachers in the classroom that let kids run with things and do not want to tie them down and have a set curriculum. VCAL doesn’t have a set curriculum [content] and that is the beauty of it and you have got to have teachers that can work without structure and want to run with projects and programs and run with the kids a little and be able to put up with a bit of ... give and take ... and to and fro ... with the kids and that is part of it ...

Sally was in her school when VCAL was first introduced and she thinks the school’s approach to the introduction of VCAL impacted on the quality and perception of the program for a number of years afterwards

... our first year we were stumbling around in the dark due to the fact there was no preparation. They brought VCAL in and I think it was October when it came on the radar that they were looking for a program to be up by the next year. Even though they ran a couple of pilot programs nobody knew anything about it, there was no money, no teachers, no preparation, no professional development as to how you
were going to do this and our first year unfortunately, because we were so ill prepared set the scene for the next 3 or 4 years ... and they put everybody into VCAL – all the naughty kids came to VCAL ... it has taken us years to recover from that ... and yes it is because the school directed those kids into that it was just a nightmare trying to work with that group of kids and unfortunately that set the tone and even though we have turned that around quite considerably it still lingers there and it was a real pity ...

... I think the difficulty has been that it is seen as a dumping ground for the non-achievers and the naughty kids and we have made it here that it is not the dumping ground for those sort of kids and for integration kids was the other problem that we had. We have had a lot of problem with integration kids because VCAL is competency based and you either have to be competent at something or not competent and no matter how hard you try – those integration kids you can’t sign them [off] because they are just not competent whereas at least in VCE you can modify the program and accommodate those integration kids, but VCAL like particularly in the VET tasters, if you are not competent in something no matter how much you modify it – in the end you are just not competent – I’m sorry but so really integration kids they can get their foundation VCAL cert but they really can’t get much higher.

Sally spoke of challenges that young teachers might experience if they went straight to VCAL from their teaching preparation courses. She believed that experience and enthusiasm for VCAL were essential but she did not ... know how you get the experience because the cliental that we get into VCAL you have got to be pretty user friendly with the kids. That is not crossing that line and becoming their best friend, which is always a mistake that some people make. Being user friendly but still being able to set the guide lines and say this is where the work has to come into it and you don’t step over those lines and still keep the discipline in your class and keep everybody working and engaged. And that is what I said to one of the student teachers I had – that is experience that is just getting out there and doing over and over again – but then there is having the resources at your fingertips to be able to pull on the stuff. So I guess the teachers that we have in VCAL that have been teaching for a while have those resources. And that is what the student teachers at [university name] were saying that they don’t have all those resources at their fingertips – they don’t know who to – they can get onto the internet but they don’t know the sites to go to whereas we [experienced teachers] have got all those books and resources built up over years. They will have some of that support within the school, but ... VCAL resources that are around – yes we use some of them but they are not the best.
Sally spoke about how important collegial sharing is to teacher learning

... we are very strict on having monthly meetings, get togethers – making sure that we [VCAL teachers] share resources with each other. We meet every month to discuss all sorts of things. ... and I think that in some ways that is why VCAL works so well is that we are a good supporting group ... There is also a QA [Quality Assurance] process that goes on that is run by department so that lets us all get together and have feedback from each other on what people are doing out there – so that is good – that’s the region. We used to have a VCAL coordinator that was regional based and he was actually really good and he would get us all together and organise PDs and then the department pulled the funding on them and we no longer have that – so that to me has been a real backward step

Sally explained that VCAL relied on partnerships with industry and local employers. However due to the geographical location of the school students do not have ready access in their local area to work placement opportunities, including apprenticeships. The situation is further exacerbated by a poor bus system to the nearest regional centre which has greater opportunities for workplacements.

Sally related an example of how the VCAL program and the educators who worked in it were perceived as lesser by educators working in other curriculum in her school

... VCAL teachers are often seen as, and I don’t know how you get over this, as lesser teachers. I had this directly the other day and I haven’t spoken to this teacher since - not that I am vindictive person!! it was Friday night down the local and I just said ‘oh’ – cause we were doing the hospitality and we were doing serviette folding on the Friday afternoon ‘cause it is hard work on a Friday with any kids so we were doing practical hands on serviette folding which the kids really enjoyed and they have to do as part of their course. I mentioned this at the thing and there happened to be a year 12 maths teacher there and she said [changes tone] ‘Ah Sally I’ve spent all afternoon teaching this high level maths’ and I’ve gone ‘ah thanks [teacher name] for that’ (laughs). So there is that sort of way [other teachers perceive VCAL]. We all teach across VCE and VCAL, we teach everywhere but for some reason there seems to be that a bit of a stigma that if you are a VCAL teacher then you’re almost like you are taking an easier option or you are not quite experienced enough and it isn’t true   I teach VCE foods and you know the people that we have got working in [VCAL] numeracy teach VCE as well and the same with VCAL
literacy, they are teaching the VCE English course but sometimes there is that stigma ‘you are just teaching VCAL’. Yet to me it is harder teaching VCAL and you get a lot more out it. I have to say – I would prefer to teach my VCAL kids over my VCE food kids any day and I think that they are actually better at it than VCE kids once you get them to work, their skills are much higher.

Sally also challenged views that VCAL was easier

... VCAL isn’t for the kids who aren’t achieving, in fact it is harder for those kids as they are not organised. In VCAL you have to be organised and you have to be a self-promoter and self-motivating learner and if you are not, you really struggle.

Sally was conscious of effective succession planning to ensure that knowledge was not lost within the school. She has been VCAL coordinator twice. The first time she helped select her replacement and took a leading teacher position. Her replacement took family leave, which set in motion

... a year and half of people that did the job because they got the time and but their hearts weren’t in it so then I came off my leading teacher job after three years and came back into VCAL. If I can get someone to pick up the VCAL coordinator ship who I thought would do a reasonable job I would give it to them.

**Examples of how the narratives inform answering the research questions**

Chapter Eight contains discussion in which I comprehensively respond to the research questions. Here I briefly draw attention to some components of the school-based educator narratives.

Regardless of how long the VCAL educators in schools had been qualified to teach they referred to a lack of formal preparation and their feeling under prepared. In lieu of adequate formal preparation, there was a reliance on learning on the job. School leadership frequently appeared unaware of the difference between teaching in VCAL and other curriculum and subsequently there was reliance on VCAL educators learning while teaching. Educators described their challenges in adapting their teaching and learning strategies and
overcoming curriculum differences. Some educators were able to recognise the value of their own skills and knowledge from other contexts and apply them to their VCAL practice.

Educators provided examples of how schools did not value VCAL discursively, economically or politically. VCAL was referred to in derogatory terms, under resourced and perceived as a lessor pathway due to low perceptions of vocationally related education and training. Frequently school leadership and colleagues were heard to express resistance to the VCAL program. Educators stated a desire for (and suggest) knowledge and skills required in order to respond to curriculum-specific and curriculum-associated conundrums. Participants also expressed their belief in the value of VCAL.

Educators highlight pedagogical differences between VCAL and other curriculum. They comment on the concentrated diversity of the student cohort and the resultant concentration of learning needs they must manage. Participants explain the irony that creating opportunities for authentic learning in real life contexts requires students who are the least engaged to have the most self-motivation. Educators mention that not all teachers are necessarily suitable to teach in VCAL and it requires a special skill set and disposition.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have presented a collection of narrative extracts which relate the everyday professional learning experiences of VCAL educators as they teach in school settings. I have briefly provided examples of narrative components which are relevant in responding to the research questions.

In Chapter Six I provide a collection of narrative extracts which relate the professional learning stories of VCAL educators who work in the setting of PARTNERSHIP.
Chapter Six: Stories from VCAL educators in PARTNERSHIP

Introduction

In Chapter Five I provided narratives from educators who teach VCAL in mainstream schools. In this chapter I provide narratives from VCAL educators who teach VCAL in an alternative high school which I have given the alias of PARTNERSHIP. A brief overview of the context of PARTNERSHIP was provided in Chapter Four.

The following VCAL educators who worked at PARTNERSHIP taught on their own at different locations in Melbourne and regional areas. The dominant curriculum program PARTNERSHIP provided at the time of the interviews was VCAL. The educators’ stories of their experiences in VCAL are not confined to their current PARTNERSHIP workplace; some educators had worked in VCAL in other provider settings before their employment at PARTNERSHIP.

At PARTNERSHIP VCAL program content has been developed and mapped by the organisation to meet both VCAL and industry (Vocational Education and Training (VET) certificate) requirements. Subsequently VCAL programs at PARTNERSHIP include activities that integrate learning outcomes from a VET certificate and the four skills strands. Learning is situated in industry specific contexts. Young people enrol in courses that align with their interest as a means to engage them in learning. Many young people aspire to work in industry related roles.

At the end of this chapter I draw attention to examples of how the narrative extracts inform answering the research questions in relation to the learning, consequences and discontinuities that VCAL experience as they teach.
Phil: “you need to have a pretty good degree of lateral thinking”

Phil was in a coordination role at PARTNERSHIP at the time of his interview. After finishing High School in the mid 90s he went to university and completed a Bachelor of Education. He started teaching in a secondary school the following year. Five years later he started teaching VCAL in the school. He had been teaching for a total of eight years before being employed at PARTNERSHIP where he taught VCAL for two years before taking up a coordinator position. Phil spoke about his experiences teaching VCAL in both school and PARTNERSHIP.

Phil’s first experience of teaching VCAL was in a school setting. At the end of a teaching year he was asked if he would take a VCAL class the following year. He felt:

... really under prepared didn’t know a lot at all about the course and the way it was structured and how it fitted into students getting a qualification – how to structure assessment tasks back to curriculum learning outcomes ... I really had to prod and poke and find out as much info from as many people as possible about VCAL.

Phil suggested that some of his colleagues did not seem to understand enough about VCAL to explain it to him

... I sort of found that even the VCAL teachers or the VCAL coordinators weren’t particularly helpful. I felt they didn’t have a really good grasp at the time of the whole concept of it.

... I don’t think our principal sort of ... I think it was just the assumption on his behalf that we all knew what VCAL was and how it worked ... which was completely different.

Phil said that eventually he

... was able to sit down with a literacy teacher who taught it before and she gave me a lot of material which I used ... she was helpful in terms of giving me curriculum in terms of ‘this is what I do for this’ and ‘this is what I do for that’ but couldn’t really expand on it any more than that.
To overcome feeling ill prepared and to address gaps in his knowledge Phil persevered. He explained his approach:

... throughout the year I got my hands on the whole, the VCAL book in terms of the learning outcomes. Then – like I pick things up pretty quickly so I was able to start saying ‘look I’m not going to use that or that’ and I started writing my own curriculum and mapped it back to the VCAL learning outcomes. That year I had to go and do a VCAL QA [Quality Assurance] and I was told the day before and really under prepared and under resourced for that and that first year that I did it was a massive wake up call. So that was my experience of it. The PDS [Personal Development Skills] that I taught I picked that up pretty quickly as I was able to use a lot of the year 12 Physical Education and Health and so I was able to incorporate components of that into the PDS course because the kids I had were pretty sporty bunch so that I was able to facilitate some programs there pretty easy. But in terms of the resources that were given to me – not a lot. And in terms of how I was prepared for it – not very well at all.

While Phil managed to boundary cross into teaching VCAL, he related a story regarding a teacher who was not able to do so. The teacher was appointed VCAL coordinator when it was first introduced into Phil’s previous school, he explained:

... we were one of the first [schools] to introduce VCAL. The guy who was in charge of running VCAL – he pulled the pin on it during the year because he had no idea what he was doing. He had no resources, he was given no guidance and it just all sort of became too much for him [and was] apparently stressing him out too much. I think he had been back and forth to the principal and said that if the issue wasn’t addressed he would go off on sick leave. ... [The school] didn’t run it [VCAL] for a year and then we reintroduced it a year later ... we had a specific VCAL coordinator and a VCAL team of teachers – and in its infancy there I still don’t think that they were properly resourced and look the VCAL Coordinator was a librarian. He had a history teaching background. So they kind of said – there you go do that! Two of the other VCAL educators were the year 12 and year 11 coordinators at the time ... so there wasn’t a whole heap of resources, time and effort put into them and ... into developing the staff to teach it.

I asked Phil if, due to learning about VCAL in a school setting, he had felt prepared to teach VCAL when he commenced his employment at PARTNERSHIP.

... unbelievably [so] and there was some staff who started here when I started here who I spent a fair bit of time helping them with because they
had no idea, did not understand it, were struggling to get their head around understanding the concept of how it all pieced together. With the knowledge that I had I felt that I was also a ‘go to’ person for other staff. Even though I was only teaching at the time [not a coordinator] they would contact me and ask me a lot of questions about VCAL so yeah I think that put me at a huge advantage and definitely I felt that I was significantly better equipped with my experiences in a school coming into this role. As I said it was only through me really wanting to know more about it and doing my own research in terms of getting on the VCAA website and having a look through material that I came to that – I wouldn’t ever say that it was because I was ever informed or given information or anything like that.

... Here I still don’t think that we provide enough information to them about what VCAL is, what the LOs [Learning Outcomes] are, how the tasks they teach are mapped back to VCAL and that is something that we want to identify and get better at.

I asked Phil how he came to have an understanding of applied learning. He doesn’t think that he actually had an understanding of applied learning when he first started teaching VCAL, but he believes he has a better understanding now. He thinks his understanding of applied learning came as he taught in the program...

... I am not too sure to be honest I think it was probably more reading the learning outcomes and seeing what the LOs [Learning Outcomes] were and then having a look at the class and the class dynamics and understanding they were a pretty practical outdoors group and instead of having them in a classroom and facilitating lessons that way – to be actually outside and more hands on based practical activities.

... I think the only way you learn in VCAL is by doing it and learning as you go ‘cause I don’t think the preparation that goes into staff teaching is adequate to be honest.

Phil indicated that he had thought deeply about what he would like as preparation for teaching in VCAL including how he thought greater learning could be elicited from Quality Assurance days. He explains his point of view...

... if I was being trained up to teach Personal Development Skills what would be ideal is be shown examples of what applied learning is – like WHAT IS APPLIED LEARNING? And shown maybe a traditional learning method and then how that could be Applied in a VCAL setting and
actually get maybe some people who have taught VCAL a little while, who understand the concept well to actually get up and speak and say, ‘this is what we do’ – ‘this is why we do it’ and this is how it applies back to the learning outcomes - because too often at those QA [Quality Assurance] sessions too often it will be is someone from XXX getting up and saying ‘oh we run VCAL and we run a dance program and here is our dance program and here is a video of it and isn’t it wonderful and isn’t it great – look what our kids can do thank you for your ten minutes and sit down’. That doesn’t tell me anything. That just tells me that a school ran a dance program as part of their VCAL – that doesn’t give me any assistance in planning my own VCAL learning experiences and tasks for kids – to actually be shown and demonstrated some examples of Applied Learning.

Phil mentions that during his time at PARTNERSHIP he has been to a professional development session where this approach was taken

... we had two professional development sessions at the end of last year, one was on literacy and one was on numeracy and I sat in on the numeracy one and it was brilliant. It was absolutely fantastic. They actually showed all the staff, they gave them a ten sided dice and they gave them a heap of worksheets [I mention a name] yes – fantastic – he spoke, he ran the activities and then linked the activities back to the learning outcomes – it was brilliant it was really good and I don’t think there is enough of that... ... you could see light bulbs going off when he did that.

Phil believed that his Physical Education teaching background with an established ability to develop practical activities for students in his teaching assisted him in thinking of applied learning activities suitable to meet VCAL learning outcomes. He knows VCAL teachers who are traditionally classroom based and others who used their method area, such as Mathematics, to develop VCAL programs which require students to hypothetically buy a car using finance and considering stamp duty and on-costs. However he believes that not all teachers are necessarily suited to be VCAL educators as illustrated below

... I would think that someone who can’t think laterally and can’t think outside the square and doesn’t have that practical background – I think they would struggle - or they do – I see it with my staff now - those who don’t have that background they really, really struggle with conceptualising applied learning, writing tasks and [facilitating that]. ...I think that to be a VCAL teacher you need to have a pretty good degree of lateral thinking, think outside the square. You need to understand the
dynamics of your class more, you need to think on your feet a lot more, you need to – and that is the issue – you need to be able to change tasks because if there is something set in the VCAL curriculum and you are working with a particular dynamic and it is not relevant or suitable I think that in that environment you need to be able to change it and change it pretty quickly.

...I don’t know how many teachers would feel comfortable enough to do that. It something I encourage when I visit [my staff]. That is, some do too much where the kids are in front of computers and it takes a fair period of time for me to sit down and explain to them [the educator] ‘here’s a task that is not working for those kids, they are getting bored, it is not applied learning, here is how we could make it applied. There is a perfect example of a unit that we did and there was just a questionnaire sheet about coaching styles and I actually said you can take these kids out to different training sessions in the area – to the football clubs training grounds and have a look at the styles of training that they do – observe the coach, have a look at how the coach interacts with the players, have a look at how he conveys his messages to them in a group – and then you can identify whether they are authoritarian, autocratic, personable passé fair – rather than have the kids just sit there and punch away at an assessment task at a computer. When I explained that to some staff, they said that is a great idea that is awesome – I had never thought of that. Some can – but most can’t. I reckon. That has been my experience in my role.

Phil then provided an example from the previous year. A staff member, despite having one on one time with Phil, could not seem to increase the amount of applied learning that he delivered. The staff member maintained a teaching and learning approach that predominately involved students working on computers. Phil told me that the staff member... was actually moved on because he was not suited to the program and did not understand applied learning and I would say no amount of time and effort that I put into him could make him understand how to increase the amount of applied learning that he delivered so, for me personally, it is something that you are inherently good at or you are not.

Later Phil further explains...

... I don’t think you could ever train someone to be a good – or to be an excellent applied learning educator without them having something within first but I think that applies to the whole teaching profession to be honest.
When Phil is asked what additional skills he would like as a VCAL educator he has no hesitation in responding. He commented

... particularly at VCAL level – you need to have an empathy with your students. That is really important. You need to understand that one size doesn’t fit all. As a VCAL educator there needs to be a high degree of individuality in a classroom which caters for individual differences. What I am saying is there might be a task that if you have a group of 20 it might suit 12 and it might not suit eight so you are not getting the best out of those eight – so how can you modify that task or give them something different to cater for their individual differences – I think that is a really important skill to have.

As each educator at PARTNERSHIP works on their own with their students in locations remote from each other, the approach to professional development differs from that in schools. Phil explained

... at this stage, because we are a small organisation there is not a lot of money allocated to professional development in terms of [individually] If I was at a High School I would be given a set budget and I could go away up to six times throughout the year to a professional development to assist me. In a school setting there might be something on during the day – I can go to that and another teacher can cover my class. Here we can’t do that – it is really difficult to cover other teacher’s classes in this environment and the money for professional development is not there. Having said that, we set aside at the end of every year and in the middle of the year some professional development days ... ... but they are kind of set – there is not individuality around what is available to staff. ... That is definitely something that we would like to improve or expand on as more funding becomes available.

Despite the constraints of funding Phil felt that staff were encouraged to share their knowledge and expertise, as he explained

... in our staff meetings we might get a staff member to talk to the rest of the staff about their experiences of professional development they have been to and something they have done, seen or heard about and how that could benefit everyone. We push that ... and I think that staff learn ... really well by that. The other thing we have tried to do, instead of the staff coming here [PARTNERSHIP headquarters] for a meeting and [us] just disseminating information we have split them up into regions so every second week they have small group meetings instead and there is a lot of collaboration and sharing of ideas and things like that.
Pierce: “when you say applied learning what do you mean?”

Pierce attended university after completing his secondary education where he undertook a general primary school teaching and arts degree. He then spent a year in England playing cricket and working menial sort of jobs. When he returned to Australia he obtained a graduate position at a rural primary school. Pierce explained that after about seven years he had a desire to

... move away from teaching young children because [I find] it very taxing work [and not something that] comes supernaturally to me, whereas young people I probably find a lot easier.

Pierce described himself as particularly sports orientated and when the primary school at which he worked was able to obtain funding for a Physical Education teacher he was able to fill the position full time for three years. He then spent four years working for a private company which educated primary school teachers in inclusive ways to teach Physical Education. He had been working at PARTNERSHIP for about six months.

Pierce had no experience of teaching in secondary programs and told me his only experience of senior years’ pathways was having undertaken VCE himself. He explained

... but obviously it [VCAL] is different and I guess that is part of the challenge I find as well – that is my back ground and trying to find that and turn that into an understanding of the VCAL.

From the discussion with Pierce it was evident that he was struggling to understand both VCAL and his new work environment

... this is my first year teaching in this environment in a VCAL setting ... to be honest I’m a little unclear at this stage as to what all the VCAL units are – cause they [are] mapped into the work we do into the curriculum and to be honest it still seems very convoluted to me which units are hidden in there – or that type of thing I am starting to get my head around the job in general but it is the VCAL part of that is probably to be honest a little bit vague with me.
PARTNERSHIP is an industry specific VCAL provider so it is assumed students have an interest in working in a related industry to the program in which they have enrolled. The educators at PARTNERSHIP are given their curriculum

... here are the units that you need to do, here is the curriculum.

Unlike VCAL educators at other providers, at PARTNERSHIP VCAL educators are given the applied learning tasks which will meet VCAL Skills Strands learning outcomes and do not need to devise them. However Pierce indicated the option was there to use alternative tasks

... you can [devise them] they [the managers] say you have the freedom to do that. You can do that if you don’t particularly like the way they are set out. As long as you map back to certain criteria then you can certainly change the tasks but they are there for you.

Pierce said a clear curriculum was not enough to support his preparedness to teach VCAL or even to explain how VCAL works in practice

...I have never received such a clear curriculum before. So sometimes it is like you are playing catch up to understand where that curriculum has actually come from and why it is worded – or why the tasks are the way that they are ... the experience in it [VCAL] is the teacher of it I suppose ... I think there is an expectation that you will just sort of pick it up along the way. Which to be honest – I feel full [of information] from the start of the year as it is.

Pierce thought that he would have found it very difficult if the curriculum content had not been given to him

...it would be a nightmare – it would be very challenging – very challenging – I think [I] just need more training – just need to spend the time sitting down and understanding the program more and planning and I think that was one of the things we didn’t have a lot of in time at the start of the year – to sit down and plan a little bit – but that is offset by the fact that you have that curriculum in your hand a little bit - on a silver platter sort of thing.

Pierce appreciated that PARTNERSHIP had already mapped the VCAL content to the program’s Learning Outcomes as it meant there was no immediate urgency in his coming to an understanding of the structure of the program.
... I guess one of the things that comes from this organisation is – don’t stress if you don’t understand the VCAL part of it – it is all there you just don’t necessarily know how it is packaged – we have looked after [it].

When I asked Pierce how he had come to understand the applied learning basis of VCAL he seemed unsure of how to respond

... well not really, and I guess part of the problem with where I am at the moment is understanding all the terms and where they fit in, So when you say applied learning what do you mean?

Pierce was not aware that the VCAA website might be of assistance in learning to teach VCAL

... to be honest I wouldn’t know, I’m sure it probably would. [That’s] a little bit to do with time, probably lack of awareness that it is there in the first lace, I’m sure that there is a website there, but it is not known to me to be a resource and I haven’t thought ‘I’ve got a spare five minutes here – I might look that up’.

Partnerships are an important aspect of developing applied learning programs, but in our conversation, Pierce admitted to feeling overwhelmed. Pierce explained

... the fact that there are so many organisations we are linked to that we have to be accountable to. My head is honestly a lot in administrative tasks and trying to work through processes.

At PARTNERSHIP, professional development is provided at the beginning of the year for all staff. As staff teach in similar programs, this initially appears an efficient approach, Pierce commented

... we had an induction process at the start of the year here – about 2 weeks - and we would come in and do different professional development on whatever the organisation thought was valuable.

The downside is not all professional development may be useful to everyone. It can be difficult for educators to individualise the professional development they undertake to their own needs. Pierce said

... they say that if you would like to do some more professional development in something in particular we may be able to find that somehow – but I think that is one of the challenges of this organisation ...
... there is only so many dollars to go around – so that balance between what your staff know and do professionally as opposed to having to actually pay for it is the challenge.

Pierce was of the opinion that he benefited most from learning that had occurred informally within a collegial environment. He said

...probably the best professional development we have done is in our ... groups [weekly meeting] there has been sharing amongst the group from people who have been there and done that – tried this didn’t do that – this didn’t work or whatever it might be – that is probably the best.

In a contemporary teaching and learning environment where the use of IT is encouraged, Pierce thought that the computer creates as many challenges as it seems to solve. The classroom resources which are provided to him from the PARTNERSHIP budget relied on him using computers to develop work and students using computers, rather than handwritten responses, to complete and submit the work. The particular cohort with whom he worked were resourceful and Pierce expressed a desire to learn how to manage the use of technology as a teaching and learning device better. He provided an example of a task that may have been completed by one student and then

... saved it under a different name and passed all around the class.

He often thinks his students have out-smarted me by submitting work which is not their own as he explained

... some guys just seem to get their work done amazingly quickly when it has taken them a half an hour to get started.

Pierce commented that if work was handwritten he would be able to identify individual student handwriting as it was handed in.

Pierce feels more constrained in his current teaching that he did in his previous setting where he felt a real joy of creativity. He interpreted the teaching and learning brief there as
... I give you this and you can go and taken it wherever you think, we will tell you if we think you are stuffing up but basically as long as you are getting good results ... BUT here it is kind of like ‘ok’ they are giving you so much curriculum, they are giving you heaps of stuff, but then you are kind of a bit limited in the way you teach it.

In contrast, Pierce felt in his current teaching role

... like I have been innovative this year and I have been pulled up on it ... I kind of feel closed in and structured and there is not a love of creativity as such because it is more a love of curriculum, or stick to the curriculum or pedagogy sort of style.

... [applied learning] it is very much hands on – the tasks that you do are hands on – but this is where I feel VCAL is really interesting like I haven’t got my head around it yet – the tasks are very hands on so they are useful tasks – but they are very narrow in their focus – “I need to do this task to get this end” and so that for me is not creativity.

... and it seems to me in this setting it is the old pedagogical style of standing up the front with a PowerPoint presentation saying how you write a letter is the most efficient way to go – so it doesn’t – that isn’t the sort of teaching that floats my boat.

He was surprised to find that his primary school teaching skills were more relevant than I expected them to be. Pierce thought that the students enjoyed some of the basic things such as sitting around in a circle offering an opinion. He said the activities appeared to encourage relaxing with their classmates and promoting communication.

Pierce is comfortable saying to his students:

... I’m learning as I go – I’ll make mistakes – you’ll make mistakes – let’s be ok with that - we are not all perfect.

Pierce said that while he struggled to understand the curriculum he did not expect to be alone and part of his reason for participating in the study was to help others. Pierce comments

... I think you know that is almost part of the reason why I wanted to do this interview is to say – well look ok – this is the way I feel starting out – maybe there are other people in the
same boat, in the same situation, and maybe that could be addressed.

**Preston: “you are even more vigilant with VCAL”**

Preston completed a traineeship after leaving school and deferred university study for one year. He then did a sports coaching course at university before travelling overseas for a year. On his return to Australia he completed a Graduate Diploma of Education. He had taught Health and Physical Education at a secondary school for two years prior to working at PARTNERSHIP. He loves teaching something he is passionate about. He says he always loved working with young people in a coaching and teaching capacity and gets satisfaction from seeing them improve.

Preston described the major difference between his experience teaching in a school and his teaching at PARTNERSHIP in the following way

... school was fairly academic so it was a lot of teacher driven type activities and students were supposedly more suited to an academic type curriculum whereas when I came here – it was very much applied learning. What I enjoyed about it the most was the opportunity for students to be actually doing [something and] student ownership over those tasks.

Preston explained his view of the differences between VCE and VCAL

... in [VCE] this is the curriculum that is it – [the students] will go with it because that is it whereas these VCAL kids if they don’t want to do it – they won’t do it! And if they can see that you are prepared to give a bit your way – they will do the same. Because they are good kids – they just want you to see a bit from their point of view as well.

Preston was happy with his preparation for teaching VCAL and did not find the move from his VCE teaching to teaching VCAL at PARTNERSHIP very difficult – I was fine. This was because he considered the teaching approaches he used in his Physical Education teaching practice were already hands on and provided him with relevant experience to draw on. Preston explained

... yeah it wasn’t foreign – and I didn’t think ‘I will struggle to do that” I think the [VCAL] assessment is different and that is probably something
that takes a little bit to get used to in other words you have got - you go VCAL – you know you are not marking A B C Ds or out of 10 things like that – that was probably the bigger thing that was different for me – but in terms in how to make it applied and have students have the opportunities for those things not really because that is essentially what PE [Physical Education] is I suppose and my little experience with VET as well.

Preston indicated that he had also learnt about applied learning by going on school camps as an assistant teacher. He had watched how the lead teacher at his previous school had prepared students for camp in the classroom and then organised the camp in the field, but said

... ultimately it was the responsibility of the students to facilitate the whole thing and process and things like that – to me I really like that ’cause you equip them with skills and they would actually go away and put it into practice and [I would] probably try and expose myself to as much of that in a school setting – I liked that model.

When he first heard a colleague speak about the proposed PARTNERSHIP model of curriculum that combined VET and VCAL he thought

... that is me that is what I want to do – I want to have students who are self-sufficient and get involved and [develop] initiative and all those different types of things.

However, Preston also made the point that his decision to defer university study after school for a year and take a year travelling overseas between his undergraduate study and Diploma of Education better equipped him for working with his particular student cohort. He believes his ability to make linkages and draw on his life experiences enhances his ability to teach. In addition, he finds that contacts he has made in the sports industry makes it easier for him to establish learning partnerships.

Preston welcomed the flexibility of VCAL as it seemed to have a good fit with his personal view of education. He compared the differences in experiences of teaching in schools to teaching applied learning at PARTNERSHIP. Preston felt that in schools
... everything is so structured and then VCAL and VET make it – they give you that bit of flexibility but it is hard, you have got to almost move yourself out of that mould ... to get you thinking laterally and outside the box and things like that which I felt a little bit starved of in high schools.

He also thought the flexibility of VCAL allowed him to respond to reading his class in a way that he could not do if the teaching and learning was all conducted in a classroom setting. For example he can balance the outside activity with class discussion and meal breaks. He believes this approach achieves more productivity than if

... I just worked them all day and every day in the classroom – you would get less done than if you had, you know forty minute sessions of head down and really do it.

... that is what I love about the program – that is if it wasn’t working I could change it it’s not dictated by a bell. If I wanted to go out for the day – ’cause it just wasn’t working in class I could go and do that. If I thought it was best to work in the morning – we could work in the morning and do something else in the afternoon or vice versa.

Unlike Pierce, Preston feels there is plenty of opportunity for creativity and things like that at PARTNERSHIP, which suits his preferred way of teaching of using content that is real life and interesting. He considered teachers who liked structure might struggle with teaching in VCAL.

Preston thought that professional development in a

... school setting was very formalised. It was scheduled and you do it with other teachers.

At PARTNERSHIP he believes that his best professional development is

... done on the job by constantly improving and reviewing your practice.

He told me that this type of professional development is done with colleagues through discussions of what worked well or what did not work well with their student groups and talking about the challenges of both the cohort and the curriculum. When Preston attends professional development opportunities, such as conferences, he later finds it
... really enjoyable to share knowledge with other teachers at PARTNERSHIP.

Preston says the flexible nature of VCAL means the demands of accountability exceeded those in other curriculum. He explained

... you are even more vigilant with VCAL ... because you have got that flexibility and creativity if you get audited you need to be red hot on ... because it is simply your responsibility.

He indicated that this perspective of vigilance in VCAL perhaps being greater than other curriculum might surprise some educators who were expecting that teaching in VCAL was easier, or less onerous. Yet, for Preston the reality is if

... you slack off in terms of what you develop curriculum wise you won’t have them engaged – you won’t have your students engaged – but then if you slack off in the compliance part of it – you leave yourself open professionally.

Preston said that sometimes the gains might appear small by the standards of other curriculum, but in the context of the situation, they might be big ones

... sometimes I think with young people we expect straight As and this and that. Whereas I never forget a Mum told me in my first year of this program ‘he got himself up out of bed’. The mum didn’t have to get him out of bed. He made his own lunch and he got to the program and he did that every day.

In VCAL Preston said relationship building was important, both with the students and when forming outside partnerships

... I think your interpersonal skills are important – I think I am able to relate to the students because I am genuinely interested in [them]. I also have experience and knowledge in the area. [As part of the leadership team] I have got to build relationships with local council, clubs, management, staff, students, and other organisations. Essentially my whole role is building relationships and you have got to be able to do that.

Preston regretted that VCAL was not available when he completed his schooling
... I didn’t have this, there was no VCAL when I was going around and I think it would have benefited me and I could have still ended up in the same spot [teaching] but just under an alternative way.

... I just love it [VCAL] so much – I like talking about it. I have enjoyed talking about it – I think it is good to be able to talk about something that you enjoy talking about - reflect on some of those things which you don’t have time for in the 9 – 5 rat race.

I observed to Preston that it was interesting he had talked about himself as a hands-on learner as his work as VCAL educator offered him an opportunity to teach using a hands-on approach. He was quite definite in agreeing that there was a connection between his preferred learning style and his preferred teaching style.

**Perry: “one area I personally find difficult about VCAL is that flexibility”**

After completing year 12 Perry completed a four year double degree which qualified him to teach. He had been teaching for 10 years, including 6 years overseas where he taught very challenging students. After returning from overseas, he taught VCAL in a TAFE for one year, and was then employed by PARTNERSHIP where he had been for the last two years.

He initially did not feel prepared for VCAL. He said he needed time to move his thinking from the needs of a secondary school where assessment is graded, to the style of assessment used in VCAL. He also needed time before he understood … the learning outcomes and the various strands attached to VCAL, but now I am quite confident, but I am still learning even though it is [my] third year teaching VCAL. As you are aware our programs are integrated so that makes it different. A lot of our integrated work covers both VET components and VCAL

To prepare him for teaching in VCAL Perry would have appreciated some professional development workshops facilitated by people who were expert in teaching VCAL. He also suggested that he would like those who had formulated the VCAL program to visit PARTNERSHIP and be shown
... what we have in place and [ask them] how we can improve on that in an applied learning sense.

Perry’s experience as a teacher of Physical Education who was accustomed to teaching by putting theory into practice assisted his assimilation into teaching VCAL. He volunteered that his own learning style was partly like some of his students, a kinaesthetic learner who like to learn hands-on in practical settings. However Perry said he was also

... quite a theoretical academic sort of person as well. But I know my students are more hands on and I sometimes find it a little bit difficult to try and portray my knowledge [the theory] to the students. On a theoretical side of things they struggle. But trying to put it in an applied sense, a practical hands-on setting, the kids respond a lot better to that. Just being able to do that without overloading them with that, not unnecessary [theory], but trying to alleviate that academic side of things and focus more on the hands on. Even now we are still trying to come to terms with that. I think that we are potentially, as an organisation, setting the bar a bit high for the students [he clarified this to mean theoretically] and need to look at focusing on more of that [applying knowledge] into a practical setting.

Perry described the pedagogical model used by PARTNERSHIP as a bit

... like a primary school model, there is a lot of nurturing, counselling. There is also careers guidance and a focus on relationships, including on the parenting/living at home. A lot of our students are now starting to move out of home – or getting kicked out of home. I have had a lot of discussions about their finances. A lot of students are between 18 and 21 years of age – so they are – balancing the study – their sport – their living arrangements – their finances and so on so a lot of discussion with them about that.

In teaching life skills to students, Perry commented that he often draws on his own life skills. Perry explained

... I have reflected on a lot of my experiences overseas, my experiences when I was their age as well. Talking about part time work and my career pathways and how I worked my finances, living arrangements so those sorts of things – I certainly cast back on my own personal experiences. We really instil in our program work behaviours and in our environment and ensure the students – we try and prepare them for the workforce. We get the students to call us if they are sick - it is unlike a school environment. They call us and we try and push away from them trying to
sending us a text message or an email. It is like in the workplace – that is the expectation. Just sort of instilling behaviours – their professionalism, their uniform, the way they present themselves, being able to have phone discussion – proper phone discussions, resume writing – cover letters there is a lot of – especially in their final year – of preparing them to get out in the real world so to speak – do a lot of that on top of our curriculum.

While Perry now felt confident in understand the curriculum structure of VCAL he still had questions. He indicated

... one area that I personally find difficult about the VCAL is that flexibility. I’m probably more of a, I wouldn’t say rigid, but I like a little more structure. I like that structure and if I’m given that whole creative scope as long as we are meeting the outcomes we can do it various ways [it conflicts with my nature]. I [don’t mean] working strictly out of a text book so to speak but [I like] having some sort of guidelines so that there is a conform basis and I can consistently assess my students.

Subsequently Perry found the flexibility of VCAL

... a little bit overwhelming and daunting where there is too much scope to do whatever. I like that concept of that whole idea of flexibility and catering to individual differences of students ... but again it comes down to time and to be able to set various tasks for individual students – well I simply don’t have the time to have that flexibility so that’s the area where I find the VCAL the hardest.

When I asked to clarify his comment above as meaning “constraints on the educator can inhibit the intent of the VCAL”, Perry wholeheartedly agreed.

Perry had been teaching for over 10 years and, while the following sentiment is not necessarily confined to teachers in VCAL, he bemoaned the increase in administrative tasks since he commenced teaching. He explained

... I feel like I’m potentially not teaching at my highest level because now there is much more emphasis on administrative tasks – more so – I look at 10 years ago – email was only just being introduced - you might respond to one or two emails – but now I look at responding to 20 – 30 emails a day. Just all the administrative tasks which is steering away from actual teaching.
Perry mentioned that staff at PARTNERSHIP are spread over a wide geographical area and teach in isolation from each other. The times they are able come together collegially to share are appreciated for a variety of reasons:

... it is times like today which is good for our coping strategies where we can bounce ideas off each other and share our frustrations and concerns – you start realising that you are not the only one struggling with the changes and how best [to teach] VCAL and our VET so to flag those mechanisms are good for us – and we certainly need more of that – it is a difficult setting that we are in and we don’t get enough of that. How to get around that is probably a bit difficult.

Apart from formal professional development, Perry places great emphasis on...

... collegial support by sharing ideas and thoughts with other staff against my own learning [gained by] reading.

However, he would like more structured support from both the VCAA and his own organisation in regard to his learning needs.

**Parker: “[Jack of all trades] is nearly an understatement”**

Parker has a Bachelor of Education. He is in his seventh year of teaching, the first five years of which he completed in a secondary school environment. This is his second year teaching at PARTNERSHIP. Teaching at PARTNERSHIP is his first experience of teaching in VCAL. Parker also taught extremely challenging young people in England for two years in a program that he described as being “VCALish” as in, an applied learning style course, but “basic”.

Parker came to PARTNERSHIP after the first term of the previous year and the organisation induction processes, which are run at the beginning of each school year, were complete. So he felt as if he really didn’t have any induction at all. His first year teaching at PARTNERSHIP was...

... without the understanding of it – and without much experience

Interestingly, unlike Pierce, Parker told me that he was required to develop his own learning tasks
... it was basically an expectation that people [educators] would create tasks around current issues or current sporting events that would apply to the numeracy - making graphs and comparing statistics without an understanding of where they fit in to the structure of VCAL. You would basically create something – create kits using information that they [the students] were interested in to actually get them multiplying and doing graphs and things like that.

For the remaining three terms of the previous year Parker just had to cope and do the best he could in understanding the curriculum and teaching approaches. At the end of the year there were several professional development workshops although from Parker’s later comments these appeared to focus more on the VET components of the course, rather than the VCAL components. Parker would like some guidance on

... mapping [that is] where certain tasks that you create would sit in the structure of VCAL ... being able to create a task and have it aligned properly – not just the task but the whole reason behind the task and where it fits in and what it is going to achieve and what it is be able to tick off and what it is basically. It is the entire start to finish I think that would be useful because you would be forced to know why what that is doing there on that bit of paper.

Parker indicated that it is possible to request professional development but clarified that his learning needs may not necessarily be the same as his colleagues. Due to funding considerations professional development is implemented on the needs of the majority. Permission to attend professional development individually during term time is unlikely.

Parker indicated that saying he needs to be a “jack of all trades” to teach VCAL in PARTNERSHIP is nearly an understatement. For example, as they work on their own with their classes the educators need to be first aid qualified, complete paper work, seek signatures, control the uniform of the class, act as counsellors to students, and act as the course coordinator. While Parker indicates he can pass issues to someone else in the organisation he prefers, in the first instance, to deal with them himself.
As Parker teaches an integrated VET and VCAL program, he like the other educators at PARTNERSHIP, is responsible for the associated compliance reporting which, he says, is

... *a big thing and [involves] reporting in nearly three to four different ways on the same student.*

and as a result he often feels

... *we do a lot of box ticking.*

Parker was the only participant to mention one of the implications of partnerships. Student uniforms include branding of corporate sponsors. Subsequently when students in PARTNERSHIP uniforms, which display corporate logos, misbehave in public, which has occurred, there is an impact on branding agreements.

Parker mentioned that one of the most challenging aspects of being an educator is

... *not letting the failures get you down all the time.*

While this sentiment can be regarded as applicable to any career, I have chosen to include the following passage, expressed by Parker as he positions the sentiment in the particular context in which he works and the particular student cohort he works with. This passage highlights a discontinuity experienced by Parker as he teaches

... *some people are going to have rough lives and take a different path that you would hope they wouldn’t go and that is disappointing sometimes. Some kids you can’t help them change – some don’t want to be changed and that is different to a kid that wants to. I have a kid who is academically low – of Tiwi Islander descent – good at sport. Over the summer holidays his brother got stabbed and killed and now he doesn’t come back and that is a disappointment – kids who you have tried to teach certain things about behaviour and they get in trouble. The kids that are bad – some people are just not nice and they bring you down and that is tough one too as there is always that moment when they are being good people and you think ‘I’ll get more of that out of them’ and they just they don’t want to change and they just continue antisocial behaviours.*
Paul: “we in serviced each other and learnt as we went”

Paul had been an educator for over 25 years. He had been working at PARTNERSHIP for two years. His first experience of VCAL was in his last employment, a secondary school where he describes himself as...

...part of a group of six other staff that ran two VCAL classes which was heavily geared towards males and in that I worked on the Personal Development Skills side of it so I then brought in some of my practical skills. I was a physical education teacher/outdoor education teacher by training so I suppose I was called upon to bring across those Personal Development Skills which I have been teaching for many years. I also have a love of building and construction and a lot of these boys were the hands on type and their major projects were to build various items and that is where I learnt a lot of the hands on – we also had some Professional Development from our supervisor there - the head teacher in charge of the VCAL program so he taught us and between the five of us we in serviced each other and learnt as we went. That has also happened last year and this year.

During that time Paul attended a conference run by VALA which

...opened my eyes to the professional side of it – the accountability, the paper work, the administration side of it ... so that was the formalised training of VCAL – and then brought that back to school and then put that into practice.

When I asked Paul what other preparation would be useful for his own VCAL preparation he replied

...look ideally doing a masters in this area would help. Doing some formalised training, but having said that I think actually getting involved in it – boots and all – that is probably the best way of learning.

Patrick: “what helps is definitely those others who have taught it”

Patrick started teaching in secondary schools in 2001. He taught for seven years before travelling overseas for several years. He returned to Australia and had been teaching at PARTNERSHIP for two years. He became aware of VCAL while
teaching in a secondary school, however he had not taught in VCAL until his employment at PARTNERSHIP.

Patrick perceived that

... what helps us to get some information [about VCAL] is definitely those others who have taught it. They are more approachable because of that or you have more respect for anything they ask you to do as you think it is probably a reasonable question because they have done it before. If they suggest doing something one way it is probably best.

... when I came here to teach VCAL – in terms of the curriculum we have got so much information presented to us before we had to teach and how the curriculum was going to justify these VCAL areas and key points and those sort of things - so we got a lot of information here. About how to mark a student competent on different assessment tasks. We got loads of information in training and assessment in VET and then we– because they are sort of hand in hand – VCAL and VET but the more you understand it the more that you can see that those two are really linked together. So you can use the same sort of assessment for both I suppose. I think that is the main thing in the two week induction program at the start of the year – and again just using those staff that have done it before which was good if you had any queries.

Patrick thinks that useful preparation for new staff would be

... to observe some classes before you came in at the beginning – once you have a bit of an understanding of how it all works, it is just having time to actually prepare your classes more – I suppose you could always have more of that as a teacher. I suppose that is just being a bit greedy – to try and use your time more wisely - we are very lucky here that we do get a lot of time to work on those sort of things – it feels like more time than when I was at a school.

Patrick was quite matter of fact about the professional development available through PARTNERSHIP, saying

... our professional development is frequently provided at the beginning and end of the year – so we get great access to people coming in and speaking to us that is already set up by – say the people that have done it before – so it sort of cuts out us looking at it and saying I need to some help in this or that area – they can take their past knowledge and say ‘I think we should do some work with the numeracy element or we can have someone in to talk about the literacy element which we did at the end of last year – we had people come in from VCAA and talk about numeracy.
and how you can involve it in your class and those sort of things are good. It is impossible for them to cater for everyone and some activities you use and other activities you think that probably wouldn’t work with my particular class – it might work with another class. Sometimes they are good.

However, the event that Patrick nominated as the best professional development he had experienced the previous year was not related to VCAL, it was Australian Council of Health and Physical Education Recreation (ACPER) conference.

*Peter: “how damned hard it would be for a graduate teacher to teach VCAL”*

Peter had taught both young people and adults and had taught in Australia and overseas. He had taken a break from teaching at one stage to run his own business, but eventually returned to teaching in a secondary school before being employed at PARTNERSHIP. He believes that he

... *has always been a teacher who has taught by doing things and based my teaching on planned experiences such as ‘let’s go on a bush walk’ or ‘let’s go on an excursion’ or ‘let’s write a play’.*

Despite Peter’s lengthy teaching experience he said

... *when I started in VCAL I didn’t know anything about it.*

Peter compared his teaching in VCAL to teaching in other curriculum and said

... *teaching academic subjects is completely different – there might be something you have been teaching time after time, you have got the same kind of cohort of students, pretty much the same material, the set ways of teaching, the whiteboard, books and materials – teaching by instruction rather than teaching by doing.*

Peter was a great supporter of VCAL and while he believed there were few professional development opportunities, he had no problem in proposing ideas for content. As an example he suggested

... *you go to VALA conferences and you get ideas ... you talk to other teachers and you network ... you use your personal interests and those of*
the students when developing work ... you seek advice of experienced VCAL teachers [as opposed to] experienced high school teachers ... you look at exemplars online ... you look at schools who have won awards and made their plans available.

Peter’s approach to his teaching is to draw on his real life experience and act as an employer

... to try and develop those [workplace] skills and qualities in the kids that I would want. In my case I am often not acting as the teacher I am acting as the employer.

Initially during our conversation Peter stated that anyone could teach VCAL if they put their mind to it, later he qualified that statement by saying

... it’s not for everyone and it requires a larger skill set.

... [still later he said] the more I am having this discussion the more I am thinking how damned hard it would be for a graduate teacher to teach VCAL.

**Examples of how the narratives inform answering the research questions**

Chapter Eight contains discussion in which I use the data to respond to the research questions. Here it timely to briefly highlight some differences between the contexts of the school based VCAL educators (Chapter Five) and that of the educators who worked in the alternative school setting of PARTNERSHIP. I also draw attention to some components of PARTNERSHIP-based educator narratives.

As the VCAL program in PARTNERSHIP is industry related, students who enrol in the program are already interested in employment related to that industry. The content is developed by PARTNERSHIP management team to align with the industry and meet all the required VCAL skills strand learning outcomes. Unlike the school based VCAL teachers, PARTNERSHIP educators do not need to first identify student interests and then develop activities and tasks themselves.
However, despite being provided the curriculum content VCAL educators were still challenged by the structure and pedagogical approaches of VCAL and how to teach using applied learning strategies. There are examples of educators feeling under prepared and uncertain. Similar to the educators in schools, the PARTNERSHIP educators related how they learnt as they taught and demonstrated self-motivation to draw on their own agency, life experiences and previous skills sets to seek answers to questions and respond to their teaching dilemmas.

PARTNERSHIP provides a two week professional development for all educators at the beginning of the school year. The professional development provided to the collective did not necessarily meet the professional learning needs of the individual, despite all educators teaching the same curriculum content and having similar cohorts of students. The educators worked in isolation from each other and found great value in the collegial learning they were able to share when they met weekly at PARTNERSHIP headquarters.

Participants clearly articulated differences between teaching in VCAL and their teaching in other curriculum. Educators mention that not all teachers are necessarily suitable to teach in VCAL and it required a special skill set and disposition.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have presented a collection of narrative extracts which relate the everyday professional learning experiences of VCAL educators as they teach in PARTNERSHIP. I have briefly provided examples of narrative components which are relevant in responding to the research questions.

In Chapter Seven I provide a collection of narrative extracts which relate the professional learning stories of VCAL educators who teach youth in adult contexts.
Chapter Seven: Stories from VCAL educators who teach youth in adult contexts

Introduction

In this chapter I provide a selection of narratives compiled from VCAL educators who teach youth in the adult contexts of TAFE and ACE. Many young people who undertake VCAL in TAFE and ACE have been seriously disengaged from mainstream schooling or are not suited to school. ACE and TAFE are regarded as adult education contexts, subsequently there is no uniform and the young people are free to come and go as they please. Three different ACE providers and one TAFE provider are represented in the following narratives. A brief overview of the data collection settings were provided in Chapter Four.

At the end of this chapter I draw attention to examples of how the narrative extracts inform answering the research questions in relation to the learning, consequences and discontinuities that VCAL experience as they teach.

Nathan: “I don’t think I’m cut out for VCAL”

Nathan worked in ACE. I met Nathan by chance and a short time later overheard him make the comment I don’t think I’m cut out for VCAL which prompted me to invite his participation in my research. He had been teaching VCAL for a total of two weeks when I invited him to participate. The interview took place about a month later.

After leaving school, Nathan spent a year writing and undertaking casual employment. He then completed a two year course at TAFE in professional writing and editing which led to his enrollment in a Bachelor of Arts in writing and literary studies. Nathan then completed a Graduate Diploma of Secondary Education. My interview with Nathan took place in November of the following year.
After graduation and before being successful in getting his current position he had applied, over a five month period, for *heaps and heaps of secondary school jobs* (he suspected some were “ghost”, or non-existent, jobs) and achieved one interview. He then obtained two part time teaching jobs: one teaching VCE at a provider where he had completed his teaching placement the previous year during his teaching course and one teaching VCAL to young people at the ACE where he spoke to me.

Nathan told me that he was the students’ *third or fourth teacher since July* (he and I spoke in November). When I asked why the students had so many teachers, Nathan replied

... *I don’t know exactly I think they found it really hard to find a teacher ... I assume that I was the only applicant for what I am now teaching, so that says a lot I think.*

Nathan was referring to his perception that educators may not necessarily want to teach in provider settings such as ACE where students are often characterised as extremely disengaged and have potential to demonstrate very challenging behaviours. It is also possible that a lack of understanding about undertaking senior years study via non-linear pathways and a lack of awareness about VCAL contributed to the lack of applicants. I also know through my work that a number of teachers do not wish to teach VCAL. The combination of the position being both in an ACE setting and involving the teaching of VCAL may also have deterred applicants.

Nathan started his employment with the ACE provider at the beginning of term four. VCAL curriculum had not been covered in his secondary teaching course. He had heard of the program because an extended family member completed it several years previously. He completed some research of VCAL prior to his employment interview to overcome his lack of knowledge. To do so, he searched online including accessing VCAA documents to see if secondary schools had uploaded examples of VCAL programs. Nathan wanted to be knowledgeable,
prior to his interview, as to the type of tasks included in a VCAL program and how they were enacted. He said it’s *not a good thing to admit, I still kind of don’t completely* [he appears to change his mind as to what he was going to say] and continues

... *I understand it now but maybe it took four weeks to really get my head around it ... but still turning the outcomes into entertaining practical assessment I still ... I don’t think I’ve been doing a good job with that so for that kind of stuff I have been looking on the internet as much as I can to see what other teachers and schools are doing.*

After he was offered employment he was allocated the Work Related Skills Strand and the Personal Development Skills Strand to teach. He became worried that he would not have adequate basic knowledge of the curriculum. Ironically he found that his rigorous experience of looking for work helped him with devising content for learning outcomes in the Work Related Skills strand. Nathan drew on his own recent experience to inform teaching and learning about resumes, cover letters and interview techniques. He explains

... *I understand their positions at their age regarding their resumes. My resume is only now starting to look good when I have a few degrees on there.*

As a result of Nathan’s experience in searching for work he feels he is able to bring empathy to similar situations his students may experience:

... *I know what it is like to do a Centrelink [government welfare organisation] application ... I can tell them that it is not a nice thing and their aim should be to not have to deal with them as soon as possible ... I think in teaching literacy I will be able to use a lot more of my English as Second Language and writing skills ... I think it is a process I have been going through as well to recognise my own abilities to present, negotiate, engage with those outcomes.*

It appeared that at the time of the interview Nathan was still coming to terms with constructing a response to the requirement for applied learning pedagogical approaches in his VCAL practice. Searching for information about VCAL was not confined to preparing for his employment interview, he continued to search for teaching resources once he was employed. He commented
Chapter Seven: Stories from VCAL educators who teach youth in adult contexts

... there still aren’t a lot of resources online... for the VCE I teach there is a wealth of resources online. I have heard of the principles of applied learning but ask me to say any of them and I can’t.

He was critical of his teacher education course

... in my graduate course last year it [applied learning] was like a meaningless term. It was dropped in the middle as if they had to drop it in to cross off a box. If they knew what it was they had an extremely bad and flawed way of teaching it, making it an apply-able thing in itself, making it something we could base a lesson plan on, or adapt something from or to.

Nathan’s frustrations were further exacerbated by his inability to attend professional learning due to his two part-time teaching jobs. He commented that he found it...

... difficult to go to professional development sessions because of my schedule ... I don’t know what would help me” [Nathan doesn’t yet know what he needs to know].... I also have little faith that I would benefit from them so there is reluctance ... [to attend].

Teaching across two different senior years’ curricula in two different provider settings to two differing student cohorts prompts Nathan to reflect on his practice and his students in each context. He explained how the two cohorts differed

... in VCAL more than anywhere else rapport is important ... in my VCE class the students are self-motivated and see a future for themselves and the learning will take place regardless of their relationship with me... in this cohort [his VCAL class] there is a concentration of young people who struggle with self-esteem, self-image, self-belief and self-consciousness.

Nathan accepted that students with challenging behaviours are found in all education settings, but explained the situation in his ACE setting this way, first acknowledging there are...

... individual problems for every individual student, and these are problems that you might get in a secondary school, but it will be across the secondary school not all compacted into one class ... we have got five or six classes and all of them are similar in that they have all got students who have been expelled or had to repeat so they come here, or got
pregnant so they weren’t allowed [back into their school] or [have] disability or mental disability.

Nathan perceived a discontinuity between the support for teachers in schools and the support for teachers in ACE where there is a higher concentration of young people with challenging behaviours or learning needs

... in a secondary school there is the support and here, there is definitely some level of support but for example they are getting a social worker here next year – so that will be a help, but in a secondary school it is at least a given they have a counsellor.

Nathan explained how he approached forming pedagogical relationships with his students

...when I started with this class, I can’t (like a lot of other teachers might) I can’t come in and be the strictest, authoritarian (and that’s not my style anyway) ... there is mutual trust now, that comes from building a rapport, letting them know that I don’t assume they are degenerates and I don’t assume they are going to rob my phone if I leave it on the table [or] spray paint my shoes and that has helped with that kind of stuff.

Despite Nathan’s assertions above, our conversation revealed that Nathan had, and continue to, negotiate challenges. He was reflective when he described his early experiences teaching VCAL in the ACE setting

... first weeks were a bit rocky. The lucky thing for me is that this class has the first term next year to finish unit 2, so I didn’t have to – I tried to concentrate more this term on indoctrinating them as to what is required at senior level, cause they are intermediate level at the moment and I’m building a rapport, which next year if I have the same group, which I hope I do I can build upon the rapport I have made and the pressure will be on them, because the funny thing is, when there is a deadline set, when they do understand they risk failing most of them will, you know, their heads will be out of their bags during class and they will raise the standard. I had two students today request extra work from me so they could get ahead and not so much stress in term one ‘cause I warned them about that. An important thing for me was not to judge them immediately as to what they are often called in the community or referred to in the community... [eg] they are the underclass and dole bludgers and they are here because they failed miserably elsewhere [Nathan did not want to reinforce stereotypes]. I have spoken to another teacher who has started here recently and I think that is going to work against her which is funny because she has got 30 years of experience under her belt and I wouldn’t
have thought she would have done that [reinforce stereotypes]. Also [what] to expect – I spoke to them all individually today and I have throughout the term, once I got to know them, just letting them know that I do expect good things from them, to pass, to care about the quality of their work and to care about how they present themselves which I see as a big part of what VCAL should be doing, again it comes down to personal development – the name of the subject says it all and I think that has worked in making the class run a bit smoother.

Nathan believed the wider community held perceptions of VCAL as a “lesser” senior high school pathway. However, he said it is not necessarily an easier curriculum with which to become familiar or teach. Nathan explained

... the learning curve for VCAL is much larger than even for VCE which is supposed to be, is looked at as a higher level of education, I know some people use the word alternative but it is the mindset that VCAL is down here [gestures towards the floor] and VCE is up here [gestures towards the ceiling].

In Nathan’s case, teaching in VCAL changed his own previous perception of the program. He said

... during the first few weeks I was kind of questioning whether I believe in VCAL or not and I think today what you have seen – the painting [students were painting murals on external walls in a sheltered courtyard] and that is what has made me believe in it, before that I was still a bit ... I think it had to do with the little amount of work happening and the ease for the student not to do it that I was reluctant to not think that it was an easy ride, so to speak, but that is probably more to do with me having traditional education beliefs anyway.

Nathan, as a teacher of both VCE and VCAL programs, firmly believed the VCE and VCAL programs were different and teaching in VCE did not necessarily convert to an ability to teach in a VCAL program and the differences were often not understood by education professionals

... the same way that someone who has taught English in a secondary school for 25 years or 50 and then [teaches] maths, it’s a similar dichotomy [teaching VCE and then teaching VCAL] and I don’t think there is any appreciation of that ... by many in the teaching profession itself.
Nathan felt his allocated work load including the requirement to meet compliance demands was made more difficult by working with particularly needy and challenging young people. He said

... the most challenging – even after a short period of time I am so sick and tired already of all the administrative garbage and bureaucracy for example - the way the [VCAL] results have to be cover sheeted for audit down the track. This is draining and takes away from the reason I wanted to become a teacher. I'm a teacher not an admin assistant.

The uncertainty of knowing how many students would attend his lessons each day impacted on Nathan. He teaches in Work Related Skills and Personal Development Skills and sees the same group of young people for each skills strand for both, which is a total of two complete days per week. There are 18 students overall and he rarely sees more than 10–11 students at one time and 8–9 students is the norm.

... There are some classes where at the end of the day I just think 'what the hell am I doing I really need to get out of here, but that was early on, the last few weeks have been good. I feel a societal responsibility to the students. Even after the first class I felt that to a degree because all of them have some sort of issue.

... I [have gone] home in the last few weeks knowing there is some benefit from the program and good work is being done. I have found a way to keep that thought [I don’t think I’m cut out for VCAL] but also do my job to a degree of quality.

Niles: “In my first year I floundered so badly”

Niles worked in ACE. Niles described himself as an early school leaver having left school at 15 or 16 years of age. He had attended

... a tech school. Although you might say I come from a middle class background my schooling was not dissimilar to a lot of the young people I work with ... other boys I knocked around with were pretty happy go lucky and not so school and study orientated – it wasn’t a priority. I guess I can relate to some of the young people and where they are at now.
He was unable to obtain an apprenticeship and so, once Niles left school he worked in supermarkets, factories, labouring and driving (trucks and taxis) and describes himself as

... jack of all trades, but not a master of anything.

Niles comments that it was only when he was older, in his early to mid-30s, that he became

... more motivated to go and study. As an adult I had a bit of direction.

First, he enrolled in a Certificate II in Literacy and later some VCE subjects before a teacher suggested he undertake a Bachelor of Arts. Later (40 plus years of age) he undertook a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) and became qualified to teach in the middle and senior years of school. He had been teaching for four years when interviewed for my research.

Despite his varied employment history, empathy to the young people he taught and an applied learning teaching qualification he did not feel adequate prepared to teach and strongly voiced his feelings in relation to this

... all due regards to the applied learning course, which I thought was a great course and I had some really supportive lecturers and teachers on the course. Look I believe coming out of our course and walking into classrooms, especially in the ACE sector that it’s a little bit like sending soldiers into a war zone, giving them three weeks of intense training and expecting them to know how to fight. You know really it is just – I might have had some visions of walking out and calling myself a teacher, you could say that on paper [however] I’m only really starting to feel, after four years that I see myself as being an effective educator – and plus if I went to a school I would probably have to change my style again.

Niles’ first year of teaching VCAL was in another organisation and he spoke at length about this initial experience

... we were all sort of thrown into it – no one had any real experience at all although we were all registered teachers. I think we were all provisional. I don’t think the motives behind the organisation running the course were genuine, unlike where I am working now and feel very supported by management. There is a reason why we [the organisation] are doing it and that carries through. [Last year] there was no support at all. In my first year I floundered so badly ... I think a lot of that was
because there was no mentor system ... I took the job because I wanted to hit the ground running but that wasn’t probably the best job to take. Basically I was just told, these are your classes – you need to come and teach them – the times and the subjects and then it was for me to devise curriculum activities and assessment tools – to build relationships with the students and they were probably the toughest students that I have come across. There was no welfare or anything like that – I remember trying to use classroom management techniques that possibly worked for older teachers at [school name] and being teacherish so to speak.

... The kids really revolted and they also wanted a villain so they quickly made me a villain. Every morning or afternoon there would be a new girl crying in the office of the lady who was coordinating (who was about 24 years old and fresh out of university) – bit of a bleeding heart – which I suppose you have got to be in this job even though I think I am. I have found a balance somewhere in between ... and of course a male coming into this environment and no one knew me. I always felt like I was watched or wasn’t completely accepted in that first year, so the whole experience was quite negative actually. but I think it was a – I probably got a lot out of it as well - sink or swim you know?...and realising that the importance of building those relationships with students and building that base to work from. Coming into a group of a dozen students who have all got their own individual serious problems and learning issues and then trying to pull the classroom management issues out of the hat and thinking this will work, this’ll work, and then it ended up being complete crap (if the reason they are there is because they punch teachers or whatever) because they just haven’t responded [previously] to those sort of techniques.

... probably close to the end of the first year I was close to chucking it in.

In contrast to his initial experiences in a school setting Niles’ current organisation provided support through a formal mentoring program. Niles explains the value of this

... I know when I started here there were trainers, as they were called, because they didn’t really employ qualified teachers so much. [These were] people who were doing as good or better job as the teachers I have met because they are really more about building relationships and understanding welfare issues and flexibility rather than educational outcomes. They are Certificate IV trained so they do cut it when it comes to educational outcomes but the ethos of the whole course of the whole program is really transitional, about supporting young people in a tough time and getting to move them on to further education or employment rather than getting them top marks in VCE or getting them all of their VCAL in one year – which is unrealistic in some ways – because we only
have the three days a week and if they can’t get it in school – it is going to be tough for us.

Since then Niles has modified his expectations of himself and his students to the context in which he teaches

... the expectations I have probably dropped them a bit. I am probably being more realistic now. If you are always going to think that you are going to engage all your students in every class you are kidding yourself, in this sector anyhow. It just doesn’t happen. You are going to have bad classes and you are going to have things happen. I find that if I can keep myself in the right space to be of benefit to other students sometimes you have to roll with the punches. You do have kids that won’t get anything out of your classes – but I don’t beat myself up over that anymore, it is part of life, it happens.

... I have found balance which is using some of the elements of teaching training that I learnt from older teachers and classroom management and also having a laid back style where I am not coming across as a teacher. I feel I have come a long way ... because I work with pretty tough kids and I seem to be able to build relationships with 95% of those students ... I will always let them know when they have crossed the line and I will let them know when I am not happy. I won’t stand for anything like students that have been very disrespectful to myself or other students and I will always pull them up and they know I won’t take any rubbish. But at the same time I think I have learnt from the other trainers to be flexible and you can’t take all the classroom management [books and theories] in the world into THIS classroom [VCAL classroom] because it simply doesn’t work ... you need to earn respect and earn those relationships - you definitely can’t demand it because these sort of kids will just tell you where to put it basically.

Niles commented on the importance of collegial support in an environment where student behaviour was frequently extremely challenging and unpredictable. The collegial group also shared information about assessment, welfare and the young people they taught. Niles explains

... we have a great team. It is not so much a hierarchy setup ... we always run things past each other but it is what you think is going to work best in the team type of thing - that is crucial that we all work together and get along. I think if you had bitchiness etc ... it wouldn’t work at all. The kids are always quick to buy you off against each other ... you have to have that cohesive environment – at the moment we have a fantastic team so it makes life a lot easier and that is part of the reason I haven’t had
problems with students for ages – which is remarkable given the job I am in - you would expect to be stopping fights etc.

Niles explained that the collegial environment was not only important in dealing with the students; it was also valuable as a coping mechanism to manage the strain and stresses of VCAL teaching

... we are all in a big office together and when we are not teaching we spend 50% of our time talking and some of that is personal and social – a lot of it is really debriefing where – as long as no students are about or people from outside we will talk openly and frankly about different students and what is happening and that is a mixing pot of understanding what is going on.

Niles said that staff were provided a fair amount of professional development. He qualified this by saying staff, due to the nature of the context, such as working with young people who are at risk of suicide, probably do more welfare professional development such as mental health training, as they do teaching-related professional development. Interestingly the strong collegial network within which Niles worked acted as a barrier to his willingness to access some professional development in work time. He explained

... we have a great team. Keep in mind the situation – eg at the moment we are down a teacher. If there was a professional development on Wednesday [which is] the busiest day – unless it was something really needed – I would probably make a decision to say no - I won’t go – because I am needed here and it would be a lot of stress on other people [if I wasn’t here]. [I would] weigh it up. It is not so much a hierarchy setup.

Near the end of the interview Niles reflected on the difference a mentor would have made to his learning to teach VCAL while also highlighting discontinuities between teaching VCAL in his environment and teaching VCAL in a school environment

... a mentor would have helped, but it depends what sort of mentor – as good as the mentors were that I had in schools, their mentoring was appropriate for that workplace, but it wouldn’t have been for where I am now. Some teachers in schools wouldn’t have a clue if they came in here on how to go on. I probably wouldn’t if I went to a mainstream school and had to be very, very organised and structured because you sort of get into a bit of a flow where you can take things the way you want to a bit. If you decided that you want the class to go on and check out the art gallery and
do something a bit fun – you can do that – you don’t have to check it out with someone. In a school maybe I would struggle like the kids would in a school with my background (laughs).

... thinking back sometimes you get lecturers even at [university] from the departments that weren’t as much into applied learning and flexibility the way we run. Maybe they wouldn’t have a really accurate idea of the how these sort of environments work – it is so separate to the real school environment [Niles emphasises the unique nature of teaching in ACE and the characteristics of the cohort he teaches].

Noel: “there are so many skills you need”

Noel had been employed at his ACE for about eight years. He had been attending the ACE to complete his own senior years study as a mature age student and an opportunity arose to participate in an employment program there. He was accepted and first employed in an IT position, teaching himself the skills the position required as he worked. One thing led to another and he started to work in youth programs, they saw that I was quite capable of doing that. Noel described his progression from teaching in youth programs generally to a specific focus on teaching youth who were at risk of disengagement from education. He explains

... and I just went in further and started to teach VCAL and progress into becoming a coordinator.

Noel said his education wasn’t too bad and that he attended private schools. However, Noel had concerns about his lack of a formal qualification. He explains he

... 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].

... the flip side of the coin I guess is ... that I feel like I’m not as prepared as other people that have been through the school sector to come in and teach I have sort of always felt going to professional development opportunities a little bit umm ... undereducated so to speak.
While Noel may not have been a trained teacher he had a range of life experience and life skills that he believed were valuable for his teaching in this context. He explained

... I have done my certificate IV in workplace training and assessment. I guess ... I was hired on some of my life skills or life opportunities I have had. So most of that would be being a single parent, raised my own two children for about 12 years or so by myself ... I worked with a [group] helping to run the youth program ... my work before coming here ... I’ve done things like garbage collector, I’ve been a concreter, a lot of my work as a single parent was farm work. I did painting as well ... all sorts of things.

Noel felt really comfortable teaching in the VCAL space

... it has been a succession of events which has led me into it but it really suits the type of person I am and I really find that because of my own school experience that’s where I really excel with VCAL ... ... I just enjoy what I am doing, I enjoy working with the kids.

When I asked Noel about useful preparation for teaching VCAL he highlighted the needs of educators in his setting vary from year to year depending on the characteristics of the current cohort.

... It is difficult [to know what you need] 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.

The reason for this is that the young people in his VCAL cohort are high risk which includes a range of potential behaviours

... there is drug problems, there is home problems, there is motivational issues ... 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.

Noel referred to the way VCAL might be perceived in other provider settings

... 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.
During my interview with Noel, he provided many examples of instances where students struggled with their study. As a result I asked “do you have kids in your VCAL cohort that could academically choose any stream they wanted to”? Noel replied

... yeah very much, we have had kids that have had really bad home lives or they have had deaths in the family or something like that so they’ve fallen through the cracks at school. We’ve got one good example he’s gone to Canberra, he’s an IT [Information Technology] technician with the Institute of Sport ... so yes we do have a lot of kids that can go anywhere, they’ve just had that little hiccup in their lives and we are able to pick them and get them back on track.

The ACE provider setting at which Noel worked had been delivering VCAL since its introduction. Noel highlighted for long term providers of VCAL the content of VCAL professional development opportunities were becoming repetitive

... and we’ve been in there [VCAL] from the start so there are plenty of VCAL opportunities but we are finding that it is really repetitive.

However, he highlighted the value of networking with VCAL colleagues at professional development events to share ideas and debrief with like-minded people about the challenges they face as educators who work in VCAL. Noel explains

... but I still find it really beneficial, mostly to get and see new programs that people are actually doing and just hearing that other people have the same sort of issues that you do and you know bounce off each other a bit and blow off steam and that sort of stuff.

Noel and his colleagues worked with a cohort who had a concentration of challenging behaviours and were regarded as high risk. He particularly felt the pressure of the ongoing responsibility of ensuring duty of care. Noel spoke of the importance of respecting the boundaries of his qualification

... 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.
In his discussion of some of the key challenges he faces in his daily practice Noel described how conscious he needs to be in his classrooms of the power and control that technology can give students.

... one of the biggest issues in the classrooms with technology is the kids and their mobile phones and capabilities of their mobile phones. I’ve had an issue where I’ve had one kid line up the camera to film me while another kids tries to bait you and get some sort of reaction. I’ve had several kids [who] have been bullied through mobile phone use and spreading of pictures and things ... that affects us as well so we have to be aware of even phones under the table and things like that.

Noel felt that dealing with young people who have very complex lives impacted on both his practice and his ability to distance himself from his work.

... it impacts on... well not only practice but ... I have a lot of trouble actually separating my work and home life. 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.

As a result Noel suggests additional support would be beneficial to develop skills in order to work with young people who undertake the VCAL program and better manage his own wellbeing. He explains

... look, one of things I find is a real short fall would be being able to manage the stress that is associated with them and there is really high turnover of staff in this field ... so I guess being able to manage the baggage that comes with it ... the wellbeing of staff and self, dealing with all those issues that you deal with that is my number one thing that comes up all the time.

Nash: “if I had my time again I would be a VCAL student”

Nash worked at ACE. Nash said that during his own schooling he was a reasonably successful student in an academic stream, but he comments that he was also

... never really one to agree with it or fully engage in it – I always did enough to get through without really feeling part of it. My academic performance in later years of state secondary school would have been significantly better had I been involved [in a program like VCAL].
However Nash felt that he got lost in the transition from VCE to university study as, at that time there was no support for students in mapping and undertaking career pathways. He subsequently enrolled in a university degree course for which he had no aptitude. When it was obvious he was failing the course he received some study advice from the university which redirected him to a degree which considered his strengths of mathematics and biology. He later found full time work and time spent overseas. Through these collective experiences Nash identified an interest and enjoyment in working with young people.

Soon after the introduction of VCAL into the senior years’ curriculum he completed a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) which provided him with a teaching qualification. He felt the degree consolidated his heartfelt knowledge that applied learning pedagogy was the right way to go. The applied learning focused teacher educator course also provided technical knowledge of applied learning as teaching practice. Nash believed that his personal belief in hands on learning and his own life experience and skills were his preparation for teaching VCAL. He explained

… I think I have always been an educator in my professional life at least, if not before that. I had no formal qualification in education but the principles of learning are something that come to me fairly easily. I was always the one organising games, organising football drills out in the street. I remember coaching kids, under 12s when I was 17-18.

… I think my prep has been really sound there is nothing that I think I would have done differently to end up as a VCAL teacher because my whole personal experience with education has a bent towards that model. My whole professional career that has had a core element of education in it [and has been] around the principles of adult learning and applied learning, that outward bound stuff that was strong within Duke of Edinburg Aware, adult learning stuff – to me it makes complete sense because whatever structure it fits really well. Everything I have done has had that core of educating in it and it has all been in a real life setting, not in a classroom setting.

… I don't think we should ever undervalue life experience for educators before coming into the education system, or continuing through the education system.
Nash was enthusiastic about VCAL and had reflectively considered about the qualities needed by VCAL educators to be effective

... I think to be a successful VCAL teacher you do have to have a fairly high degree of emotional intelligence – those Mayer competencies [employment related attributes] need to be right up there – it is not just about working from a text book. I think you have to have a lot of self-awareness to be a very good VCAL teacher

Nash felt it important to provide description of the cohort of young people who undertook VCAL study in his ACE and insight into the context in which he worked. The students are early school leavers or students who hadn’t been to school since they were eight or nine years old

... there is no common theme really with the students that we have here. Well....there are a couple of common themes. One is that most have had experience with bullying one way or the other, probably both ways. Family breakdown is one that is fairly common. Low numeracy and literacy – definitely. From those three things you have mental health problems, drug and alcohol use and varying degrees of homelessness – so they are the common themes.

While historically there had been an assumption within the ACE that students would represent a low socio-economic group, that was no longer necessarily the case

... we are seeing a bit of a dynamic with more young people from middle class socio-economic groups engaging in this sort of education.

There were a number of contradictions in the environment in which Nash worked which provided professional challenges. While the ACE provided study options for disengaged young people, it is regarded as an adult learning environment. This meant there were implications for the management of young people who are not legally regarded as adults. Nash explains

... the other part of it is the decreasing age of young people who are looking for other [study] options. We have never taken 14 year olds because it simply doesn’t work for 14 year olds in this environment. Even for 15 year olds coming into this environment there is significant risk. They are forming relationships with 17/18 year olds [and there is significant difference in development between the two groups]. Just because they are 15 doesn’t mean they are emotionally immature any
more than an 18 year old. But the fact that the 18 year old can offer access to more things or has done more things that the 15 year old – there is significant risk there. Look it is a real balancing act. Risk management of our student cohort is a tough one and each individual person we have to make some really hard assessment on their suitability and the risk that is going to ...the risk versus the educational benefit – the educational and social benefit which for a lot of these kids is just as important – yeah it is a real fine line.

In Nash’s context there were skills, other than teaching-related skills, he needed to support his practice. Nash describes his situation

... it is an incredibly difficult and often stressful job in this environment because you are providing significantly more than a curriculum based program. We have young people who are significantly damaged and have really high levels of need. Some of them are dangerous. Some of them are probably more dangerous to themselves than anything. They suffer anxiety, depression, the whole gamut of psychological disorders, Autism at probably the lower end of Autism – but certainly Asperger’s is one that we have worked with. We are providing a really holistic program with that really strong pastoral care - again coming back to that idea of people feeling safe. Unless you can make these young people feel safe in this environment your chances of success are really low. So from a professional development point of view – yeah we sure need to know how to deliver literacy, numeracy under VCAL - (but) we need to be dealing with suicide intervention, mental health first aid, drug and alcohol awareness, domestic violence – which I am sure all teachers have to have or have some sense of it – but we are really at the coal face of [and have a concentration within a smaller group].

Nash spoke about the difference in the type of professional development he and his staff need when working with their particular cohort as opposed to educators working in other curriculum and provider settings. Specifically Nash commented

... predominately professional development that we can access is tailored to schools and school teachers. Different cohort of clients (students), different environment setting, different needs, etc etc. What we have found is that until recently a lot of the professional development has missed the mark for us and for our staff. We have got significantly more need to provide pastoral care to our client group because they are the more at risk young people (notionally).

In addition, Nash felt he required professional development related to applied learning and the VCAL skills strands.
... [how to] apply things like literacy and numeracy to applied learning is something that we have been trying to get hold of – experts in that field – there are experts in those areas – but accessing them has been quite difficult.

An aspect of the conversation with Nash highlighted was that in his environment the cohort could be regarded as holding the power, contradicting assumptions of a learning environment in which the educator is positioned as powerful

... I think the critical thing initially is that the students gain confidence and it might be just that they feel safe and they ... and there is a default position of respect and I think that is where this generation Y is. In our generation respect needed to be earned, in this generation it is just a default position and you [educator] respect me first otherwise there is no way I am going to respect you. So this group are saying we want to come in here no matter what our story is no matter what our interests are and we want respect immediately. The cohort wants to be respected as individuals as young people, as whatever they are doing and they will really struggle to engage at any level unless they get that, so there is a confidence that in them being confident that you will respect them.

One of the factors to impact most on programs and educators in Nash’s ACE context was that of a perceived lack of funding to adequately resource the program. Ironically, according to Nash, there appeared to be a disconnect between the intent of the program to reengage young people and a new funding model in ACE. The cohort who enrolled are least likely to attend consistently due to a range of reasons, including homelessness, yet the new funding model was predicated on actual attendance rather than enrolment. Subsequently the program funding for staff and resources is likely to decrease which makes providing a continuing quality program for those students who do attend quite challenging.

_Nell: “how do you teach somebody who had nowhere to sleep last night”_

Nell worked in ACE. Nell has been a qualified teacher for many years. After leaving school Nell completed teacher training to become a primary school
teacher. Over the years she has taught both full time and undertaken emergency
teaching. She has raised a family and also worked on the family farm. She had
her first contact with the ACE, at which she now works, as a volunteer about 25
years ago. A conversation with the manager at that time resulted in her teaching
in a range of courses related to knowledge areas such as English, mathematics,
literacy and numeracy.

It became clear during the conversation that Nell felt confident in teaching in the
VCAL style of curriculum. She barely mentioned challenges teaching the program
in relation to pedagogy or curriculum, her focus was the challenges in teaching
the students who attend the program in her particular context.

Students who attend the ACE VCAL program include early school leavers who
return to finish their secondary education. In many instances their enrolment is
a consequence of a requirement by Centrelink [government welfare agency] that
they attend some sort of training. Not all students are happy to attend and many
have either challenging behaviours or personal issues that have bearing on their
study, for example Nell commented

... how do you teach somebody who had nowhere to sleep last night? How
do you teach someone who has been out of home for a week because
they have had fight with Mum (unless they have got someone else [to
stay with]). I went only a few weeks ago with one of our youth students
because she was kind of in the throes of leaving her boyfriend and we
went around with the Salvation Army to the caravan park where she was
going to stay the night and this girl was so alone and so unless someone
is dealing with all of that – that is one aspect of the challenging
behaviours then the other aspect is in the classroom.

... I have been prepared to be flexible. One of the things you need to do –
very important – is to establish with them straight away a kind of one on
one relationship, but an equal relationship in a way. In the sense, ok,
there is a line we can draw where I am the teacher and the person in
charge. At the end of the day if you want to pass you have to do these
things. It is such a different atmosphere to school you don’t get locked
into the end and it doesn’t happen.
... We don’t get that conflict situation that you get in secondary schools with the teacher. In schools you will get one kid who will look to have a head on with the teacher and everybody knows that there are four others in the room waiting to see if he is going to draw blood. The teacher has to stand their ground and has to prove they are boss sort of thing. That doesn’t happen in these sort of situations. One reason is the smaller groups, it is the rapport that you have with them. We have the ability to say ‘look you are really cranky and out of sorts – go away for 5 mins – go and walk around the block’ ‘yes you can go out and have a smoke’

Another difference between school and ACE in management of students is that ACE are able to devise strategies in staff meetings to meet real time requirements and implement them immediately. Nell indicated that in a school it may be six months before that could happen.

When I asked Nell about her preparation for teaching in her context she replied

... how do you prepare somebody to manage youth? The preparation was a gradual and supported induction and if I go back to the original times, we did for example, challenging behaviour management, mental health stuff with a psychologist [names psychologist] who came and did a professional development session with us. We actually ran VCAL before they invented VCAL to be honest, we really did. These boys were doing car renovations on some antique cars and XXXX probably has one of the largest collections – and they were assisting in the restoration of some of these cars as part of their program and then doing maths and engineering and you know. I didn’t particularly teach this class but I know I was the person in the classroom next door who came in to sort out when two boys, and it was probably one of the most violent cases, when one wanted to pick up a chair and heave it at the other sort of thing. And cases like one day I left the room for 2 mins thinking they were fine and in fact my class were, but there was a girl in the class next door and, no he was in the class next door and they interacted and he finished up putting his fist through the door because he was so angry with her, and I was so grateful it was the door and not her face and she was a little miss who had asked for it all ... you just ... I don’t know how you could throw anybody into it ... you couldn’t throw anybody into it without preparing them and yet the preparation has been accumulated.

Nell has reservations about young, new teachers beginning their teaching career in a context such as the one she works in
... think I would hate to see any young teacher in that position without some really good support – because in fact they need somebody to debrief with, they need somebody to just chew over ideas with, they need to be able to ... if you can’t draw on your own tool kit immediately you need someone else to be able to draw on.

She acknowledges both the value and reality of learning on the job, but suggests support is important

... learning on the job is very valuable if you have the support around you and have the help you need. If you have someone you can go to and talk to. And here – you have seen our office space – we talk to each other all the time even to the point, if someone is having a bad day (I don’t mean the teachers) [teacher name] will come and say to me – ‘just be aware that you need to know that something has happened to this person and they might be a bit ratty today’ Just be supportive without letting – because there is a line where, they [students] need some clear boundaries and they are not just allowed to do as they please.

_Trevor: “I take risks”_

Trevor was teaching a year 11 VCAL program at a TAFE and had been a trained teacher for two years at the time of the interview. Trevor was an early school leaver who was fortunate to take up a hospitality apprenticeship. The apprenticeship provided him with skills that enabled him to obtained employment while he travelled extensively around the globe. During that time, he frequently found himself

... in different educational roles, generally working with younger people in sports environments – water sports swim instruction and things like that.

Later he emphasises that I have always seen myself as an educator in different roles including mentoring young people.

As an adult, Trevor made the decision to continue his own learning journey and enrolled in a course related to environmental study. He realised however that

... it was the education that I was enjoying more so than the study which led me into wanting to get my teaching qualification.
Trevor then undertook a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) teaching qualification.

He believes that the theoretical background to his teaching and the knowledge of opportunities for teaching outside of straight high schools came from his Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) course. However, Trevor’s own life and study experiences have moulded his enacted professional teaching philosophy, as he explained:

... the actual ability to relate to a student who is struggling with life and is potentially difficult and irksome and doesn’t want to know anything has come from my own background and history that I went through as a student and young adult. I hated school and study and any kind of academia and hence the reason why I gave it away at 15 years old – and didn’t return until I was 30 which was a big step. I am dyslexic myself so going back into TAFE environment to an adult learning course was the last thing anybody expected me to do, including myself, but I just found a way to learn. I think that was the point with me because I identified how I learnt and from there it just blossomed and I was able to pathway myself, avoiding pathways that I knew I wouldn’t thrive in and highlighted ones that I would. Subsequently I just continued to grow. That is what I take forward into the classroom, this ability to identify where the learner is at what they need to do and how we can best effectively get them ... and how we can best assess them fairly and justly and that is why I enjoy the VCAL so much.

Trevor explains his commitment to focusing on student centred learning and incorporating the VCAA principles of applied learning into his everyday classroom practice. When he begins working with a new cohort, he first attempts to get to know the students in his care before starting to negotiate curriculum content with them. Trevor pointed out:

... the first week of my teaching is nothing to do with curriculum or anything like that – it is solely about the student.

Trevor explained how the environment of TAFE differed from the experience of school for the VCAL students he taught.

... it is solely set up as an adult learning environment and I would say that 50% of the students are coming to us because they didn’t like the traditional school environment and perhaps an issue of authority and perhaps they had an issue with timing, or [wearing] uniform, things like
that and they come to us. Then you have another set of students who come because they have behavioural issues that didn’t work in the school environment and they need to be treated like adults. [Then there are] students who have the gap [in study] and then come to us. You find initially [they] are very unsure, very closed and not sure where they want to go and what they want to do. But generally once you get them to express themselves they really thrive in the adult learning environment.

Other students he teaches come to TAFE because they have been bullied

... and that is why they left school for in the first place. They may have been bullied in school. So then they come to the adult environment and if we have a cohort of students who are bullying others we try and get on top of that pretty quick because otherwise you can lose the same students. But I have several memories of students who were seen as difficult students in their school settings, but really were just fighting to be treated as adults and then have come to us and we have been able to just turn them around and they have gone on to do year 12 successfully.

He thinks that there is a myth that is out there [in the community] about the young people who undertake programs such as VCAL at TAFE. When Trevor says in socials conversations that he works at TAFE in a year 11 program the response is ‘that’s the kids that nobody else wants’. Trevor continues

... that is kind of true. A good majority of our students have been asked not to go back to their previous school or perhaps have been suspended or expelled from their schools. We are dealing with that, there is no question about that. I think the perception is out there that we deal with the worst. I don’t think that is true. If I look at the cohort that I have, the students we get through at the end of the year are absolutely charming, pleasant human beings and I have been lucky enough to bring [teacher education] students to work with my own students we end up graduating young adults and I think that is the point, and having gone back into a lot of schools over the past couple of years and seeing VCAL programs run in the school environment – they are dealing with children and by half way through the year I am dealing with young adults and I think that is the fundamental difference. It certainly requires a certain skill set to deal with the initial enrolment of the students we do get as they are quite challenging.

In his teaching context Trevor is aware that some people hold a poor perception of the quality of teaching and learning in TAFE. He believes that a poor perception of TAFE [in the community] combined with a poor perception of VCAL [in the community] provides extra pressure on his teaching
... the VCAL has got such a bad reputation as being for the thick kids and for the kids who can’t hack real VCE but I think on top of that TAFE is seen by society as somewhere you go if you can’t cut it at the real thing.

Trevor highlighted that applied learning needs resources yet in providers like TAFE

... you are bound by financial constraints as to what you can do.

Trevor has several ways in which he approaches this barrier. First is that if an

... activity is constrained by budget then I will go to the organisation (TAFE) and put my plea out there.

The second way he negotiates the barrier is by relying on volunteers and community organisations a great deal

... if I want something for my course, some materials, I’ll have a word with the students and see who they know, if they are involved with [an organisation related to the activity] and approach them.

However Trevor understands that not all teachers have the disposition to open up their classrooms to community involvement and the thought of outsiders (guest speakers or volunteers) watching them teach can be quite confronting.

Trevor already has contacts in a range of organisations due to his own community involvement (for example Country Fire Authority (CFA)), and his knowledge of environmental science, (for example participation in coast care committee or fish care committee). He uses these contacts as he is committed to

... adher[ing] to the applied learning principles by getting out there and making things real.

In doing so, he acknowledges that he takes risks

... I take risks, but mine are assessed risks and when I say risks it is not regarding OH&S [Occupational Health and Safety], but ‘will this work or will it not work’. I fundamentally involve the community in what I do and that’s how I am able to find my ways around agendas which may be shrouded in complacency.
Chapter Seven: Stories from VCAL educators who teach youth in adult contexts

Trevor takes this approach as he strongly believes that

... if you want a subject to really be alive that you can’t constrain it to the classroom. There is no point talking about it. You have to get out there and physically do it.

Trevor explained some challenges involved in maintaining an applied learning teaching program, especially when staff teaching in the program are casual (as he is). He thinks that highly casualised staff creates

... an inability to have a successful and progressive team all moving forward on the same page because you cannot ask a casual member of staff anything other than what they are doing on the day.

He believes that if you want VCAL to work well, a cohesive staff environment must be created with the support and commitment of the provider

... if you don’t have the people there year after year then it is going to fall down and you are not going to be able to make it work.

Throughout the interview it was abundantly clear that Trevor identified himself as an applied learning practitioner who was passionately committed to providing learning experiences outside the classroom. He emphatically commented

... this is the only way I know how to teach. I think if I had done a different teaching course I would have struggled because I teach in a very applied and hands on way and I don’t think that is ever going to change.

Trina: “at the beginning of the year I felt like it was sink or swim”

When Trina left school, she completed a Bachelor of Education in Secondary teaching but was not sure teaching was really a career pathway she wanted to pursue. While studying she was employed part time at a large department store and was offered a graduate program that she accepted. She then worked in Human Resources for 7–8 years while also having a family. She subsequently refocused on teaching related activities such as describes below

... working with young children as a swimming teacher [and being] employed by family day care. I guess for me it was a maturation process
[in deciding] that I did want to enter into education in a more traditional formal and that was [what I] always wanted to do since I was a little girl.

A sessional teaching position became available at the TAFE and Trina had been there for five years.

The year Trina spoke with me was the first year that a purely VCAL program was available at the TAFE. She had previously been teaching in VCE English in a program that combined VCAL and VCE and had taught Work Related Skills. She was now teaching VCAL literacy for the first time. However, she believed the implementation of the new standalone VCAL program into her TAFE had not been done well. Trina commented

... I don’t think there was enough preparation done for VCAL myself. For teachers of VCAL subjects it wasn’t a straight transition from teaching VCE English to VCAL literacy, or oracy for that matter. That has been quite complicated.

When Trina spoke about her preparation for teaching VCAL she said

... in all honesty – at the beginning of the year I felt like it was sink or swim – thrown in at the deep end - hadn’t done any professional development. I was given a curriculum guide and that was it ... ... I suppose I thought there would be a lot more support [from the organisation] There is a lot of support among the VCAL teachers but we are all kind of feeling our way. ... It’s not my preference but I’ll do it.

Trina, like others, had concerns that the VCAL program was not being properly matched to the needs of individual students

... we are not matching the VCAL up correctly to the people that it was intended for. The TAFE just seems to be throwing everyone that doesn’t want to do VCE into VCAL. So they are not necessarily serving them correctly.

... some people believe that our cohort is really suitable for VCAL but VCAL needs a fair bit of motivation and often that is what our students are lacking, especially the ones that aren’t wanting to do VCE. Our motivated students want to do VCE – that is social currency.
Trina was quick to quip that she need the skills of a “security guard” in her TAFE setting because of the cohort we are dealing with. Trina provided an example of...

... an incident last week where a student had not been to class for a few weeks and returned. There had been a communication gap [within the TAFE] and I hadn’t been told that he had been withdrawn in which case I would not have allowed him into class. He came into class and was OK to begin with and then I began to question him on ‘why are you suddenly back’ and then he became aggressive and I asked him to leave and he just started swearing at me and I had to go and get the year 11 coordinator who had to come in.

Trina found a lack of resources made it difficult to provide learning activities grounded in real life and authentic contexts. Trina explained...

... now as far as literacy goes and the doing hands on that is where I have really struggled because we just don’t have the resources here ... when I first had a look at all the sample units and saw that people were building boats and bridges and all these wonderful things I thought ‘oh my goodness there is no way that we can do anything like that’.

On the other hand, Trina said that if she were able to access adequate resources it would not necessarily guarantee success due to the nature of the cohort and unreliability of student attendance.

... first of all – if we did have those kinds of resources and that inclination – so therefore lots of planning time [is needed], lots of time to get something like that up and running. Our students just wouldn’t turn up. They just wouldn’t show up (laughs)!

Trina referred several times to the importance of adequate paid time for casual teaching staff working in Applied Learning programs. She mentioned difficulties in arranging team meetings when out of a team of five, three were sessional and two were employed on an ongoing basis. While the ongoing members found it easy to meet, the times did not necessarily coincide with paid on-campus time of sessionals.

... we [the sessionals] would be invited but often it is at ridiculous times or we are not here ... the success of this course depends on the cohesion on the people that are implementing it and you don’t have enough time to talk about the issues that you need to and discuss how you can change things or improve them or even just logistics – things like organising excursions ... or times when WRS [Work Related Skills] or PDS [Personal
Development Skills] things can be actively authenticated. I could then use those experiences in literacy and it just doesn’t happen because we just don’t have the time and management isn’t forthcoming with paying for people to have meeting times – or they think it can just happen once at the start of the year.

Trina perceived her TAFE provider wanted to be seen to offer VCAL programs, however the program was not necessarily suited to the cohort. Trina explained her TAFE was

... looking at offering senior VCAL next year ... I believe none of the current teaching staff teaching at intermediate level, of any subjects, believe that our current cohort would be suitable for senior VCAL [Trina clarified they have discussed the issue at length as a teaching team.

Trina said that often the program manager in her TAFE is not able to provide the knowledge and support her VCAL teaching requires and she needs to seek assistance elsewhere

... we do have somebody that is very knowledgeable about VCAL ... if I have a question about VCAL I’ll go to her rather than my program manager as I believe that she has a lot of knowledge and understands the intricacies of VCAL whereas I think the program manager understands VCAL on paper but not how it translates into real life and you need somebody that can see it ... our program manager has seen this as a new baby – but not really understanding the applied learning. I understand that too – because she is a program manager of lots of different programs and VCAL in itself is looks very different on paper to how it is delivered and if you throw in the cohort that we have got it is very different again.

Trina who was a casually employed educator with a full time teaching load, wanted to be sure that she had completed the Quality Assurance documents correctly (by attending an information professional development session) but had this dilemma

... well, I can go to PD [professional development] but I fund it myself and don’t get paid for it and lose a day of teaching on top of that. So you do feel like the odds are stacked up against you.
Examples of how the narratives inform answering the research questions

Chapter Eight contains discussion in which I comprehensively respond to the research questions. Here I briefly draw attention to some components within the narratives of educators who teach youth in adult contexts.

The educators who work in adult contexts describe a range of ways in which they learnt about VCAL and teaching applied learning. Experiences and perceptions varied. There are some who stated they have an affinity with applied learning and teaching strategies and who provided no evidence they struggled with teaching VCAL. A second group stated their formal teaching qualification was not adequate preparation for teaching in VCAL. A third group believed their life experience prepared them for teaching in VCAL. The common thread between each of these groups was that their pedagogical relationship with the students was the most important part of their professional VCAL practice, because their students were frequently disengaged or experiencing a range of social welfare needs.

The adult learning context in which they worked meant that students had greater freedom of movement and choice of attending. This was both beneficial for some students who were not suited to a school environment and detrimental for the teachers as the attendance of students was by individual choice and circumstance. Student management issues in adult contexts differed to those in schools. As the VCAL programs in the TAFE and various ACE were quite large there were other VCAL colleagues within the organisation and the theme of collegial learning was strong. This is especially noticeable in comparison to schools represented in this study where there tended to be small teams of VCAL educators who were outnumbered and marginalised by teachers of more academically regarded programs.
Educators who taught in both VCAL and other curriculum clearly articulated the differences between the curriculum and commented on differences in characteristics of the student cohorts. While the two participants from TAFE voiced quite different professional learning experiences there was also commonality demonstrated within their narratives. Both participants from TAFE made the comment that not only was VCAL perceived poorly, TAFE was often perceived poorly. The student cohorts in ACE and TAFE had concentrations of students with diverse learning needs and difficult behaviours or learning needs. This was suggested as a contributing factor to a high turnover of staff.

**Stories not told**

In Chapter Five, Six and Seven I have provided 20 narratives from the 27 interviews conducted. While all interviews support arguments in this thesis, the narratives selected most strongly describe the individual everyday workplace learning experiences of VCAL educators in the provider settings of school, ACE, TAFE and PARTNERSHIP. I have allowed the voice of the participant to dominate to provide rich and individualized descriptions of beginning and continuing VCAL practice.

Naturally there are themes within the raw data not included in the narratives. For example, a high percentage of participants across all settings bemoaned the consequences of accountability and performativity which often meant their teaching, curriculum and students were subordinated in their tasking prioritisation. In ACE and PARTNERSHIP, educators mentioned that they were accountable and thus auditable by any organisation that provided funding and this created extra workload. There was reference by TAFE educators of how casualised workforces are marginalised in accessing professional development and being included in team meetings. While these stories are also important, they wait to be told another time.
Chapter Seven: Stories from VCAL educators who teach youth in adult contexts

**Summary**

In this chapter I have presented a collection of narrative extracts which relate the everyday professional learning experiences of VCAL educators as they teach youth in adult contexts. I have briefly provided examples of narrative components which are relevant in responding to the research questions.

In the next chapter I identify and summarise themes from the data relating to the research questions and discuss the themes in relation to existing literature on everyday informal, adult, work place learning. I position the thematic discussion within Akkerman and Bakker’s (1990) stages of boundary crossing in order to describe how VCAL educators moved through a space comprising sociocultural differences and learned to be VCAL educators.

**Reflection**

\[
\text{TWO roads diverged in a yellow wood,} \\
\text{And sorry I could not travel both} \\
\text{And be one traveller, long I stood} \\
\text{And looked down one as far as I could} \\
\text{To where it bent in the undergrowth;} \\
\]

\[
\text{...} \\
\text{Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—} \\
\text{I took the one less travelled by,} \\
\text{And that has made all the difference.} \\
\]

(From The Road Not Taken by Robert Frost (1874–1963)

How apt I have found these words of Robert Frost throughout my PhD journey. Before me is my most significant choice of roads. I must choose and make a path through the stories of participants to write my interpretation and perspective of looking (Denzin & Lincoln 1998) at the everyday professional learning of educators as they work in the VCAL program. In the next chapter I present findings (leaves) no research has yet ‘trodren black’ in my quest to make “all the difference”.

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Chapter Eight: Broken, fractured and requiring maintenance

Introduction

In Chapters Five, Six and Seven I presented collections of narratives relating the everyday workplace learning experiences of educators as they taught VCAL curriculum in schools, ACE, TAFE and PARTNERSHIP. At the completion of each chapter I briefly highlighted narrative components, relevant to the research questions, which provided examples of teaching and learning experiences of the participant. I also highlighted narrative components which describe or infer the circumstances in which VCAL educators learnt and how the educators learned to work within those circumstances which were frequently less than ideal and not of their choosing.

In this chapter, as I respond to the research questions, I position the participants’ teaching and learning experiences within the theory of boundary crossing in order to describe how they learned to be VCAL educators. I begin by briefly revisiting the dialogical stages of learning, introduced in Chapter Two, which Akkerman and Bakker (2011) categorised as occurring when boundaries are crossed. I then align participants’ stories of their workplace experiences to phases of boundary crossing in order to describe the educators’ learning. In doing so, I provide evidence of each stage of learning in the form of themes.

Responding to the research questions

The findings and discussion in this chapter focus on the research questions:

1. How do VCAL educators learn about VCAL curriculum and facilitating applied learning?

2. What consequences does context have on the professional practice or learning of VCAL educators?
3. What professional discontinuities or contradictions do VCAL educators experience as they teach VCAL?

During the process of identifying themes I consistently considered the data in relation to the research questions (Yin 2012). My approach also drew on the work of Ryan and Bernard (2003, p. 87) and Braun and Clarke (2006) as I interrogated data looking for expressions which represented examples relevant to the research questions. Grouping of like expressions resulted in patterns, which I regarded as themes (Braun & Clarke 2006, p. 82). I then aligned themes with the four dialogic stages of boundary crossing.

Everyday work and learning can be messy, interwoven and influenced by a number of events and contexts. Most narrative excerpts include evidence of themes that respond to more than one research question. This demonstrates consequences caused by variables such as context, previous experiences of the educator and the nature of the provider setting. Durkheim (1938) proposed “[the determining case of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it” (cited in Star 1989, p. 41). Here variables act as preceding social facts to be considered in determining meaning from the participants’ words. There are overlaps and interplays between themes which, I argue, justifies my inclusion of large portions of text in narratives representing each participant’s own words in Chapter Five, Six and Seven.

The following discussion of findings and themes does not claim to be exhaustive of the stories my research tells.

**Teacher education courses were not adequate preparation for teaching in VCAL**

I did not specifically prompt VCAL practitioners to mention the contribution of formal preparation to their work in VCAL. It is telling that a number of participants spontaneously made reference to their teacher education course in describing their preparedness to teach VCAL. Participants bemoaned the lack of
continuity between their formal preparation and the experience of teaching in VCAL. An inability to use knowledge from a teacher education course in teaching is a contradiction which causes discontinuity as it becomes a space that interrupts any educators’ “interaction across practices” (Bakker & Akkerman 2014, p. 225). At various times within the data it is evident or inferred there is an expectation by school leadership groups that all educators should be able to teach VCAL and that their teacher preparation or existing teaching skills should be adequate for them to do so. As articulated by a number of participants, both of these expectations are flawed.

From the data I concluded that formal preparation, such as a teacher education course, was not regarded by participants to have played a significant role in preparing them for their work. For example, Sue (school) said there was no preparation “at all during my teacher education training, I reckon I have learnt best as I have been doing it”. Sara (school) said she had no preparation “NONE – not one single scrap”. Sally, (school) as a VCAL coordinator, lamented, “there was no preparation for VCAL teachers and I think that is a great shame”. The comments mean these teachers experienced no preparation for VCAL in either a formal teacher preparation course, or prior to commencing teaching of VCAL. Even Nathan (ACE) as a beginning teacher, undertaking a graduate teaching course well after the introduction of VCAL said that applied learning “was like a meaningless term … dropped in the middle as if … to cross off a box”.

Some said their teacher preparation course had provided knowledge about what to do, but not how to do it, for example how to teach content using applied learning strategies. In other words, they were provided the technical, or declarative, but not necessarily functioning, knowledge (Biggs & Tang 2007). Niles (ACE) had undertaken a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) teacher preparation course. The course had a specific focus on using applied learning pedagogical approaches across middle and senior years’ curriculum. Despite this Niles still felt underprepared. He was complimentary about the course but said, as preparation for his first teaching context, it was not enough,
especially in relation to the realities of the teaching context. The simile used to
describe his view is dramatic

“Look I believe coming out of our course and walking into classrooms, especially
in the ACE sector that it’s a little bit like sending soldiers into a war zone, giving
them three weeks of intense training and expecting them to know how to fight.”
(Niles: ACE)

On the other hand, Nash (ACE) who also completed a Graduate Diploma of
Education (Applied Learning) course said that the degree consolidated belief and
“heartfelt knowledge” that he already possessed in regard to experiential and
constructivist teaching and learning approaches. For Trevor (TAFE), another
graduate of the course, the qualification gave him the technical and theoretical
knowledge to develop experiential learning programs within the VCAL (and
other) applied learning curriculum structures.

Research conducted by McNally, Blake and Reid (2009) highlighted a silence
within their own study’s data when beginning teachers described their early
teaching experiences. The beginning teachers made no reference to their pre-
service teaching education course. A similar silence is identifiable in this
research. More appropriately the silence can be described by drawing on the
work of Star and Ruhleder (1996) who developed “a list of characteristics of
infrastructure” (cited by Star 2010, p. 611). Their list of characteristics includes

*becomes visible upon breakdown.* The normally invisible quality of working
infrastructure becomes visible when it breaks: the server is down, the bridge
washes out, there is a power blackout. Even when there are back-up
mechanisms or procedures, their existence further highlights the now-visible
infrastructure. (Star & Ruhleder 1996 cited by Star 2010, p. 611)

My data identifies the infrastructure of preparing educators for working in VCAL
is broken and in this research the breakdown becomes visible. The VCAL
educators in this study do not acknowledge benefits of knowledge formally
provided to them during their teaching qualification when describing their early
experiences in teaching VCAL. Instead, they comment on the lack of information
about applied learning and VCAL during their teaching education courses. This
raises questions regarding the adequacy of teacher preparation courses, or
ongoing professional development in respect to VCAL and applied learning. In particular, it raises questions about how teachers deemed as qualified to teach VCAL meet the first two Australian professional standards for teachers to register as a teacher with VIT. Those standards are “[k]now students and how they learn” and “[k]now the content and how to teach it” (AITSL 2015, pp. 1–2).

In a wider perspective, the data raises questions about how pre-service teachers’ understanding and critical thinking can be nurtured so they are better able to transfer and apply what they do hear about VCAL in university classrooms, and learn on teaching placements, to their work as qualified teachers.

Prior to teaching in VCAL most educators in this study were situated in a range of other teaching contexts. Their length of time teaching varied from novice to 25 plus years. As they started to teach VCAL they were required in cultural-discursive and material-economic dimensions (Kemmis et al. 2014) to develop learning materials and teach in ways which were counter to those they had used previously. The sociocultural differences of VCAL challenged their conception of their teaching and disrupted their thinking as they negotiated a pathway between teaching practices.

In lieu of adequate formal preparation there were a number of ways educators mediated their zones of proximal development (Griffiths & Guile 2003; Vygotsky 1978) to boundary cross between sites of sociocultural difference (Akkerman & Bakker 2011) in order to teach. When examining ways mediation occurred, it is evident there were stages of learning.

**Dialogical stages of learning**

In Chapter Two of the literature review I proposed four examples of boundaries which denote sociocultural differences VCAL educators might experience as they begin to teach VCAL. The first example is the boundary represented by differences which separate sites “relevant to one another” (Akkermann & Bakker
2011, p. 133). Most participants in my research were trained teachers, qualified to teach curriculum from Early Years, Middle Years and Senior Years’ programs. These are relevant to one another as they all sit within Victorian school curricula. The differences between them include the individual curriculum’s content and purpose. The second example of boundaries are the differences between pedagogical teaching practices based on didactic, transmissive teaching approaches and VCAL which was developed on a foundation of youth development principles, adult learning, constructivist learning theories and student-learning centred teaching approaches. A third example is the difference between pedagogy, which keeps students within the provider classroom setting and VCAL which promotes learning outside the classroom. In VCAL, applied learning pedagogy is intended to connect students to workplaces and social contexts within communities to situate student learning in authentic contexts.

The fourth example is the difference in perceptions that exist about the value or status of an academic pathway, which generally leads directly to university study and vocationally related education which generally leads directly to work.

Dewey (1938) argues that learning occurs when reflecting and responding to a discontinuity, while Wenger (1998) says that learning is heightened when problems are encountered and solved. Movement between the sites described in these examples requires educators to negotiate problems caused by differences in learning and teaching approaches as they transition between a practice that is familiar and a practice, which is unfamiliar, and often counter cultural in nature. Their transition zone is the space where they learn about teaching in VCAL.

The four stages or mechanisms, identified by Akkerman and Bakker (2011) describing learning occurring during boundary transition, were a result of reviewing a range of related literature. The literature included contexts that involved planned intervention or evaluation to improve practice. My research was not interventionist in nature but, contrary to my expectations, within the narratives is description of how some participants enacted self-intervention to
overcome problems they encountered which had caused discontinuity to their professional practice. During the analysis of data I identified evidence of the four stages of boundary crossing that Akkerman and Bakker (2011) describe, being identification of the boundary, coordination of resources to cross the boundary, reflection on the process of boundary crossing and transformation of practice due to learning.

In this discussion, Akkerman and Bakker’s (2011) dialogic stages of boundary crossing become:

- VCAL educators encountering sociocultural differences between educational practices which create a need for learning.
- VCAL educators coordinate their response to discontinuities in order for their teaching to continue.
- VCAL educators reflect on differences between practices.
- VCAL educators transform their teacher practice.

**VCAL educators encountering sociocultural differences between educational practices**

The first stage of boundary crossing experienced by VCAL educators as they began to teach was encountering sociocultural differences that represented a boundary between one teaching practice and another. The research on which Akkermann and Bakker (2011) based their dialogic model of boundary crossing resulted in them considering “identify” as the first stage of learning when encountering a boundary. In my own research it does not appear that participants necessarily identified, recognized, or articulated their difficulties, or problems encountered, as sociocultural differences at the time they first started teaching VCAL. This may be because dominant pedagogical architectures in provider settings are so entrenched they are normalized and unseen. Subsequently how can a sociocultural difference be identified when an educator’s experience and thinking has not been nurtured to consider the other,
or the teaching and learning environments in which educators work reject and devalue applied ways of knowing?

Instead, in the narratives, educators described problems they faced which led “to a discontinuity in [the] action or interaction” (Akkermann & Bakker 2011, p. 133) of their professional teaching practice. It appears that only with the benefit of hindsight and reflection were educators able to identify their struggles existed as a result of experiencing sociocultural differences and then compare those differences to previous or other practices. Their reflections, in which they articulate differences, could be included in this section under the theme of identify, but doing so would not accurately represent the boundary crossing story of my participants. In order that I more accurately describe their journey, the participants’ descriptions of differences are included later in this Chapter in the section VCAL educators reflect on differences between practices.

To meet expectations they should be able to teach in VCAL and to overcome their feelings of ill-preparedness, there were a number of ways that educators coordinated their response to the challenge of transition.

**VCAL educators coordinate response to discontinuities in order for teaching to occur**

Pratt (1993) argues that learning is “the construction of meaning through experience” (p.16). For educators in my study, their experience, but not necessarily acknowledgement, of sociocultural differences as they began teaching in VCAL necessitated a response in order for them to continue to teach. Their continuity of action, that is, the ability to teach in a curriculum that was unfamiliar and for which they felt inadequately prepared, was a tribute to the educator’s self-efficacy. There was clear evidence of Knowles’ (1990) six assumptions about adult learning (pp. 57–63) and Pratt’s (1993) determination that adult learning has two main principles (interpreting Knowles 1990). Pratt (1993) argues that adult learning is “actively constructed by the learner” and it is
“an interactive process of interpretation, integration and transformation of one’s experiential world” (p. 16).

The VCAL educators used determination and “personal fortitude” (Landa 2008, cited by Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 140) to construct their own knowledge and they did this by reinterpreting and applying knowledge from previous contexts, drawing on those around them and problem solving. In the educators’ stories of how they constructed their new knowledge, a range of everyday learning theory was evident. There was a strong indication that the most significant learning, which enabled VCAL educators to negotiate sociocultural differences they encountered, was informal “learning in work”. My use of this term aligns with Sambrook (2005 cited by Van Noy, James & Bedley 2016, p. 9) and describes an unstructured learner-initiated approach in obtaining answers to questions.

One consistently central theme of learning that enabled all the other learning, including informal learning, to occur was self-directed learning. Kranzow and Hyland (2016) cite Candy 1991 to highlight that self-directed learning is viewed as both a process and an outcome. As a process it includes the degree of learner control and autodidaxy. As an outcome it includes self-management and self-determination. (p. 2)

Through the process of determinedly self-instructing themselves in what they needed to know VCAL educators increased their capacity for self-discipline while at the same time ensuring continuity of their teaching practice.

**Self as a boundary object**

Star (2010), credited with introducing the concept of boundary objects, was careful to avoid specifically prescribing what a boundary object is, although she does describe what it does. She calls boundary objects “organic infrastructures” (p. 602). They have an ability to be

[a]t once temporal, based in action, subject to reflection and local tailoring and distributed throughout all of these dimensions. (p. 603)
Boundary objects also allow “different groups to work together without consensus” (Star 2010, p. 602), while “robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (Star 1989, p. 46). Since Star’s original work was first published, others have modified and adapted the concept of boundary objects for their own purposes. Wenger (1998) conceptualised boundary objects as “artifacts, documents, terms concepts and other forms of reification” through which communities of practice could work together (p. 105). When queried about the way boundary objects were conceived, used or applied by others, Star (2010) refused to define parameters or provide arguments which limited their conceptualization in any way and responded that boundary objects had an “interpretive flexibility” (p. 602). The quality of interpretive flexibility means the results of my research are able to add to the range of conceptualizations of boundary objects.

After multiple readings of participants’ stories, I found one boundary object is dominant. The educators did it themselves. The data presents a metaphorical image of educators undertaking a DIY (Do It Yourself) renovation to their existing practice. VCAL educators made VCAL programs work by being willing to move outside their own individual comfort zones and drawing on their past experiences in a manner similar to that described by Fenwick (2006) who argues

[i]n different communities, activities and encounters, new subjectivities are made possible by expanding and breaking through habitual positionings, representations and self-regulatory technologies. These breakings-through are not the result of the heroically empowered individual, and in fact are not always transparent to actors, but are occasioned by a complex play of forces within and across their bodies and work. (p. 22)

The educators established continuity of action in an unfamiliar teaching space by action, reflection, local tailoring (Star 2010) and being willing to challenge the practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) and habitual positionings (Fenwick 2006) of the dominant paradigm of teaching and learning. Some literature refers to this quality of self-efficacy as agency or professional agency (Ashworth 2013; Charteris 2016; de Oliveira, Fischer & Parisoto 2015; Jenkins 2014; Soini,
Pietarinen & Pyhältö (2016). Other perspectives argue that “the active work of participants” make boundary objects effective (Fox 2011, p. 74).

While in the narrative extracts other concrete and abstract boundary objects are, to a lesser degree, also present I came to imagine each VCAL educator metamorphosing over time into a boundary object. Clearly, the educators could not act as their own boundary object in the initial stages of their teaching until they started to respond to the problematic space in which they found themselves. Fenwick’s (2006) later reference to “a complex play of forces within and across their bodies and work” (p. 22) provides language to describe the interaction between personal qualities, attributes and dispositions which caused the development and transformation of educators into effective self-directed learners. Their own essence evolved to the extent they were able to move between, and translate meaning across, a range of sites and communities of practice to make their teaching in the VCAL program work. In doing so they were, as Star (1989) argued, “robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites” (p. 46), that being their identity as a teacher, but they were still able to “adapt to local needs and constraints” (p. 46) of the VCAL curriculum.

Table 8.1 provides a list of the qualities, skills and attributes that appeared to assist VCAL educators in becoming a boundary object.
Table 8.1 Qualities, skills and attributes of boundary crosser / self-directed learner demonstrated by VCAL educators

- Self-efficacy
- Ability to challenge local practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014)
- Ability to construct “meaning through experience” (Pratt 1993, p. 16)
- Possessing “personal fortitude” (Landa 2008)
- Ability to reinterpret and apply knowledge and experience from other contexts
- Determined
- Good problem solver
- Good communicator
- Willing to move from existing comfort zone
- Reflective practitioner
- React-in-thoughtful-action practitioner
- Proactive learner
- Reactive learner
- Possessing a range of life and teaching experiences with ability to apply them in different contexts
- Having the interests of students at the heart of their professional practice
- Respect for their students
- Able to form pedagogical relationships with students
- A desire to teach VCAL

Notwithstanding the above, Fortuin and Bush (2010) found in their study of how students in a Higher Education course moved between areas of sociocultural difference; that in order to cross boundaries “people need to be both interested and capable – something that cannot be taken for granted” (p. 20).

Circumstances not of their choosing

Unlike self-directed learning incorporated into the pedagogy of a formal course or an individual professional development plan, the context in which the self-directed learning of VCAL educators occurred was in “circumstances not of their choosing” (Blake 2016). The circumstances of their learning included struggle, isolation, rejection, lack of support, lack of resources, lack of understanding and an environment which did not necessarily value, and frequently rejected, their applied learning pedagogical practice. While literature acknowledges that teachers will learn on the job, as they teach (Hammerness et al. 2005; Kirby 2009), the characteristics and needs of VCAL student cohorts provided additional layers of complexity to circumstances not of the VCAL educators choosing.

Despite the conditions in which the educator learning occurred they managed to establish continuity of teaching. Throughout this dialogic stage, participants
describe a range of strategies that provide evidence of the contribution of a range of adult learning theories. The role of the self is evident in learning occurring through the dialogic stage of coordination.

**Struggling in circumstances not of their choosing**

Previous research focusing on the informal learning experiences of beginning teachers found that the two main learning dimensions, emotional and relational, reflected how the teachers felt (McNally, Blake & Reid 2009). While my participants are not beginning teachers as such, they are teachers who are beginning to teach in a new curriculum. Regardless of whether they were an experienced teacher with a clear sense of their own teaching identity and practice, or a beginning teacher, they included reference to their feelings in descriptions of learning experiences.

Phrases articulated by two experienced teachers: “it was horrendous”; “my first objective was to survive this” (Sara: school) and “when I started in VCAL I didn’t know anything about it” (Peter: PARTNERSHIP) conveyed emotional recognition that teaching in VCAL was different from their previous teaching experiences. In his first few weeks of teaching Nathan (ACE) said “I don’t think I’m cut out for VCAL” and the “first weeks were a bit rocky”. Trina (TAFE) and Niles (ACE) describing their introduction to VCAL used the term “sink or swim”.

Niles (ACE) indicated that his first exposure to teaching VCAL was that “we were all sort of thrown into it; no one had any real experience at all although we were all registered teachers”. The struggle almost became too much. Niles said “probably close to the end of the first year I was close to chucking it in”.

When I spoke to Pierce, he had been teaching VCAL for about six months, and was struggling to understand both the structure of VCAL and the structure of VCAL within the teaching and learning model of PARTNERSHIP. He was still finding it difficult to articulate the nature of applied learning within both of those contexts.
The participants’ struggles did not stop their teaching. They responded to the discontinuities through reflection and problem solving (Dewey 1938; Wenger 1998). Their solutions drew on and adapted a range of previous experiences.

**Learning to deal with high needs students**

As they responded to my interview questions, participants consistently used examples that made reference to the young people in their classrooms. It was clear students were at the centre of each participant’s practice and they did not consider their work separate from the young people they taught. As a result, the characteristics of the young people greatly impacted on the educators’ professional practice. VCAL educators across all settings consistently described a diverse student cohort who demonstrated a concentration of challenging behaviours, learning styles and a range of learning abilities.

Sara (school) described her cohort “I have got 12 kids here who were out of control – they were unreal”. Similarly, Sally (school) described her cohort as “rambunctious” but “highly intelligent”. Nathan (ACE) said in his class there were “individual problems for every individual student”. He suggested that in a secondary school the same problems and student characteristics exist but they will be spread across the secondary school rather than “compacted into one class”. He went on to say that, ironically, secondary schools probably have greater support in the form of welfare personnel than in his ACE setting where the concentration of needs is greater.

Sadie (school) described the challenges in teaching a young person who had an intellectual disability while trying to meet the learning needs of the larger, but individually diverse, group of learners. This was reinforced by Sindy’s (school) experience who outlined the implications of teaching a student who had significant health issues that affected the student’s ability to maintain concentration for long periods. Sindy did not feel prepared to cope with the needs of the student; neither did she understand the effects medication might
have on the student’s ability to learn. Both Sadie and Sindy commented that schools saw VCAL as a convenient place for students whom it was thought VCE was “too much”. Discussion is often raised that schools’ concern that VCE is “too much” is sometimes not about considering the abilities of the young person as much as considering the impact that poor VCE results will have on a school’s standing (Cook & Jacks 2017). When students do have significant health issues, the problem for the teacher in the classroom was how to manage that student’s learning along with the learning and learning needs of other individuals within the cohort.

Nash (ACE) worked with young people who were early school leavers or students who had not attended school for some time. In attempting to describe issues that impacted on the learning of his student cohort he referred to three themes that characterised much of his cohort. The first was that students may have either been bullied, had been a bully or experienced both aspects. The second theme was that many students had experienced some form of family breakdown. The third theme was widespread low numeracy and literacy ability. He said that the three themes resulted in students being affected by “mental health problems, drug and alcohol use and varying degrees of homelessness” which in turn impacted on educators’ professional practice.

In the cohort Sadie (school) taught there were some students that struggled academically and others who had the ability “to be able to do very well in VCE”. As Sadie described the characteristics of her student cohort she reflected that “class sizes impact to a certain degree when you are trying to individually teach”. This was reinforced by Nell (ACE) who said that VCAL classes in her setting are small in size and that assists in student management. She said this means that unlike schools “you don’t get that conflict situation” where a student “will look to have a head on with the teacher” with others waiting to join in. A reason that doesn’t happen in her setting is not just “the smaller groups, it is the rapport that you have with them”. Their comments challenge Hattie’s (2015) assertion that class size does not matter; it is the quality of the teacher. The VCAL
curriculum is designed to be individualised for each student’s interests and aspirations. A concentration of different learning needs within the cohort provides additional challenges for educators. It is unrealistic to expect a teacher to successfully meet all individual learning needs while delivering a range of individualised learning plans in a class with a high number of students who represent a high number of diverse learning needs and challenging behaviours.

Sindy (school) clearly took the learning styles and interests of her cohort into consideration in her teaching “[w]e read relevant stuff that they like”. Sindy also was clear that her practice was able to adapt in real time to the needs of her students “[y]ou have to read them on the day and you have to choose the fights you pick”. To do this however requires a special skill set and the ability to think laterally in real time.

Other research has documented the challenging behaviours that VCAL students may display (Blake 2009; Harrison 2006; Henry et al. 2003; Pritchard & Anderson 2006; Thies 2008). The original Kirby (2000) report and a number of early evaluations and reports on VCAL called for appropriate preparation and development for educators (Harrison 2006; Henry et al. 2003; Walsh, Beeson, Blake & Milne 2005). As I have argued elsewhere this does not appear to have been addressed (Schulz 2011, 2012). This research continues to suggest the infrastructure for preparing and sustaining educators working in VCAL requires repair.

**Learning to teach youth in adult settings**

Both ACE and TAFE are regarded as adult learning environments and are quite different to the environment of school as young people studying in those settings have greater freedom. ACE and TAFE provide alternative study options for young people who are early school leavers, or not suited to school, to reengage or continue their education. While this can be beneficial for the young people there are implications for staff in the management of young people who are not legally regarded as adults. Nash (ACE) said there was an increasing trend of minors seeking study options outside of school and the age of the minors was
decreasing. His ACE does not accept students who are 14 years of age or below as the risk to the 14 year old was too great. He said that even for students aged 15 years old and above there was “significant risk”. One risk was the development of personal relationships between minors and adult aged young people. Young people aged 18 years and above “can offer access to more things or has done more things than the 15 year old”. He said as part of the organisation’s Duty of Care “really hard assessment” decisions on a young person’s exposure to “risk versus the educational benefit” are constantly being made.

Trevor (TAFE) said that approximately 50 percent of the students completing VCAL in TAFE are there because “they didn’t like the traditional school environment”. This might include students having issues with authority, timings of the school day, wearing of uniform or behavioural issues that weren’t able to be managed “in the school environment and they need to be treated like adults” (Trevor). Students may also have been previously bullied or have bullied others. He said staff must react quickly if there was any likelihood that bullying behaviours would be repeated in the TAFE environment as “otherwise you can lose the same students” and the students’ potential to remain in education and transition into the workplace further decreases.

Nell (ACE) explained that there was a significant difference in the way that schools and ACE were able to manage their students. In ACE she and her team are able to devise management strategies in staff meetings to meet real time requirements and implement them immediately. She believed that in a school the ability of staff to change student management strategies took a significantly longer time. In her environment, with a concentration of students who displayed challenging behaviours, being first reactive and then proactive with management strategies provided better support to the educators.

Niles (ACE) indicated that “some teachers in schools haven’t a clue if they came in here on how to go on”. Niles also acknowledged that he was probably suited
to the context of ACE where the adult learning environment allowed him to be very flexible and “take things the way you want to a bit”. He wryly observed that in a school “maybe I would struggle like the kids”.

In Trevor’s (TAFE) context it was evident that a poor perception of both TAFE and VCAL impacted on his professional practice. He said there was a “myth that is out there” that young people who undertake VCAL in the context of TAFE are those “that nobody else wants”. He clarified his statement accepting that sometimes attendance at TAFE is the only way the young person is able to complete their education if they have been “suspended or expelled from school” but that the young people are not terrible people. Trevor expressed respect for his students and described young people who graduate at the end of the year as “absolutely charming, pleasant human beings”.

ACE and TAFE are important interventionist settings to assist in the transition of young people into further education and training, especially when school has not worked for them. Wyn, Stokes and Tyler (2005) conducted research into youth engagement programs in ACE and TAFE focusing on “disrupted educational pathways for the 13–16 year old” (p. 8) age group. They argued that there was “little research on the approaches, experiences and attitudes of teachers involved in re-entry programs” (p. 35). The VCAL program is frequently promoted as an opportunity to re-engage and re-enter education. My own research, similarly suggests that the role of educators in these types of programs is invisible and underappreciated by the wider community, yet, as Wyn, Stokes and Tyler (2005) found special skills are needed to work with young people undertaking the programs

**Learning to teach applied learning**
How to teach using applied learning strategies was not self evident to educators in this study and some participants found it challenging. For example Sadie (school) found it difficult to “go where the students are interested” and wanted to know how to teach applied learning, in particular how to teach numeracy in
an applied way. Similarly Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) and Nathan (ACE) both struggled with the concept of applied learning in VCAL. Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) asked me “so when you say applied learning what do you mean?” Pierce was a qualified teacher who was teaching VCAL so his comment was surprising, but at the same time, his quandary reflects the contested nature of applied learning described in the literature review. Sindy (school) as an experienced teacher, in a school that had been delivering VCAL for several years, had not heard of the VCAA principles of applied learning. These comments reflect assumptions made by a range of stakeholders, including other educators and school leadership, about teaching practice and what teachers know. These comments also infer there are some teachers working in VCAL who do not use applied learning and teaching approaches that are central to the intent of the program (Blake & Gallagher 2009). The widespread struggle of participants with the problem of what applied learning is prompted me to separately propose a pedagogical model of constructivist education theory and associated teaching strategies for applied learning educators (Schulz 2015).

Research has consistently reported that applied learning is different and requires different skills and knowledge (Blake & Gallagher 2009; Bottoms, Presson & Johnson 1992; Parker et al. 2015; Plows & te-Riele 2016). My research highlights a need for investigation into the pedagogical approaches teachers actually use and the relationship between the planned, enacted and experienced (Marsh 2010) VCAL curriculum.

Learning to adapt previous teaching experiences
There was clear evidence that some participants reflected on problems they experienced as they learned to teach VCAL and considered solutions to their challenges by drawing on their own previous experience. In doing so they became “active constructors” (Fenwick & Tennant 2004, p. 56) of their VCAL practice. For example Sindy (school) adapts “a lot of primary school ideas” about inquiry and problem based learning in ways that engage the interests of the cohort she is teaching. She is also willing to engage students in reading by
providing texts not traditionally regarded as learning materials. For example she buys a range of magazines at the newsagents which align with student interests. Sindy was grateful for her previous 15 years’ experience teaching but would have preferred some specific VCAL preparation. Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) was surprised to find his primary school teaching skills “more relevant than I expected”. He found some of the basic strategies such as sharing or discussing issues in a circle formation encouraged students in getting to know their peers and finding confidence. A number of educators in my research had experience in primary school teaching, and with the benefit of hindsight it would have been useful for me to elicit more information of whether their primary school teaching and learning approaches informed their current VCAL practice.

Sara (school) says that in lieu of any formal preparation she “drew on my own learning strategies” as did Sadie (school) who adapted experiential teaching and learning approaches from her outdoor education training, but still struggled with the concept of applied learning in the context of VCAL. While Nathan (ACE) tussled with the concept of applied learning, he found his experiences of seeking work and dealing with Centrelink (a government welfare department) were valuable in teaching the Work Related Skills Strand.

Phil (PARTNERSHIP) found the teaching pedagogy he used in his method area of physical education and health curriculum was able to be adapted for teaching of the personal development skills strand. Similarly, Preston (PARTNERSHIP) considered the teaching and learning approaches in his method area of health and physical education were based on applied learning and he found no difficulty in translating those pedagogical approaches into his VCAL practice. Preston also related how he had drawn on his observations of how a fellow teacher had facilitated the planning and organisation of a school camp so that “ultimately it was the responsibility of the students”. He saw that project based model of learning being at the centre of applied learning and teaching.
Problem and Inquiry based learning has traditionally been integral to the teaching and learning approaches in primary school (Marsh 2008) rather than in secondary school. This may cause a dilemma for some teachers as to the aptness of teaching young adults using theory and learning approaches entrenched in the pedagogical architectures of teaching and learning approaches used for young children. While Phil (PARTNERSHIP) was surprised that his primary teaching skills were relevant, Sindy (school) instinctively drew on her primary school skills. Sindy is an example of how “practice architectures of one practice come to shape or be shaped by the practices and practice architectures of another practice” (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 44). Each of her professional teaching practices were shaped by pedagogical and professional ecologies she had experienced.

**Learning to create a hybrid practice**
A number of participants’ VCAL practice were shaped due to the interaction of what Kemmis et al. (2014, p. 44) call “ecologies of practices”. For example Sara’s (school) previous life and teaching practices had given her the confidence to shape a hybrid practice to respond to the challenge of teaching VCAL. Niles’ (ACE) initial approach of using “teacherish ... classroom management techniques that possibly worked for older teachers” at his school was not successful “the kids really revolted”. Niles needed to find a balance with traditional classroom practices and practices suitable to build learning relationships suitable to the cohort with whom he was working. He described his initial experiences in his current position

> trying to pull the classroom management issues out of the hat and thinking this will work, this’ll work, and then it ended up being complete crap (if the reason they are there is because they punch teachers or whatever) because they just haven’t responded to those sort of techniques [previously].

Niles (ACE) eventually created a practice where he uses some of the elements of teaching training that I learnt from older teachers and classroom management and also having a laid back style where I am not coming across as a teacher. I feel I have come a long way ... because I work with pretty tough kids and I seem to be able to build relationships with 95% of those students.
While experienced teachers might have a professional toolkit, on which to draw in creating hybrid practices, inexperienced teachers do not necessarily have access to fully formed personal skill set of resources. Nell (ACE) said “[if you can’t draw on your own tool kit immediately, you need someone else to be able to draw on”]. This is problematic in VCAL where access to experts who have the “right sort of knowledge” about applied learning is not guaranteed. It is possible that VCAL educators may draw on colleagues who provide, as Billett (2001) argues, “unintended and undesirable knowledge” (p. 114).

Akkerman and Bakker (2011) argued that creating a hybrid practice was the result of learning which occurs in the transition zone between different practices. The development of hybrid practice is also known in literature as “communicative learning” (Mezirow 1990, p. 9). As shown here it can also result from interaction between the educator’s “ecologies of practices” (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 44). But as Billett (2001) warns the hybrid practice may not be that which is intended and may be influenced by poor perceptions about vocationally related education (Argyris & Schön 1974; Blake 2009; Brown & Sutton 2008; Connell et al. 1982; Henry et al. 2003; Jenkins 2014; Pritchard & Anderson 2006).

Learning to adapt previous life experiences
Both Sara and Sue (school) had a range of life experiences on which they drew to support their learning while teaching. On the other hand, Sadie (school) said she learnt and coped by “pretty much mak[ing] it up as I went along”. This reflects the findings of a number of writers (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Hammerness et al. 2005; Kirby 2009) who argue that the practice of teaching provides much knowledge. Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004) however highlighted that the context or circumstances of the setting affects learning. In this study that is certainly the case. As a consequence of their circumstances, learning while teaching was imposed on the educators, rather than learning being an option undertaken at a time that suited the educator. The imposition was due to the absence of adequate structured or formal preparation. In their learning response, the participants demonstrated Knowles (1990) assumptions about
adult learners, being ready to learn and having a view they were responsible for their own learning. Some transformed and transferred previous life experiences. Not all teachers have extensive life experiences to do so.

Sadie was a much younger teacher than either Sara (school) or Sue (school) without extensive life or teaching experiences. Sadie admits to struggling to teach VCAL and understanding applied learning. However she made the most of her existing skills set, including teaching and learning approaches from her method areas of physical education, environmental science and outdoor education. On the other hand, Sara an older and a more experienced teacher was used to being innovative and resourceful, having spent many years teaching in remote Australia. She was quite firm and matter-of-fact in telling me that if I hadn’t been a very experienced teacher with a fairly strong work ethic this would never have worked ... if you put someone else who had no ideas they would have been in a terrible mess.

Both older and younger teachers articulated enthusiasm for their VCAL teaching. The only discernible age-related difference in their learning to teach was in the type of life and teaching experiences each participant had to draw on. Those with greater breadth of experiences appeared advantaged.

Frequently life experience had bred empathy in participants that they used to connect with students. For example, several participants mentioned their own experience of being an early school leaver was a way they connected with their students. For example Niles (ACE) had lacked direction and motivation after leaving school and said other boys I knocked around with were pretty happy go lucky and not so school and study orientated ... I guess I can relate to some of the young people and where they are at now.

He was not the only one who used his experience of early school leaving to connect to his students. Noel (ACE) “left school at year 10 and I guess that sort of taught me how these kids think”. Trevor (TAFE) was another early school leaver who spoke about using his own “background and history” as a “student
and young adult” in relating “to a student who is struggling with life and is potentially difficult and irksome and doesn’t want to know anything”. Trevor (TAFE) did not return to study until he was 30 years of age. He has applied the strategies he drew on to manage his return to learning to assisting his students find study pathways in which they are interested. While Nash (ACE) was not an early school leaver he commented he felt as if he had got lost in the transition from school to university and as an adult found it hard to find a way forward to a vocation. He believed his experience enabled him to connect with how his students might feel.

Kirby (2009) observed 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. (p. 4–5 citing Odell 1990; Feiman-Nemser 2001; Martinez 2004)

It is evident that the experiences of many participants aligned with Kirby’s prediction that much teacher learning will occur on the job. Kirby’s statement however, appears to presuppose the existence of a community of practice with the knowledge capacity to nurture a newcomer. Kirby was also referring to new teachers; the majority of teachers in my research are not new teachers. A number have over 10 years’ experience. Ironically their range of life experiences as well as their teaching experience contributed to informing their VCAL practice. Their length of teaching experience, on its own, did not guarantee their ability to boundary cross.

**Learning the experience of VCAL is the teacher of it**

Examples that a great deal of teacher learning occurs while educators teach (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Hammerness et al. 2005; Kirby 2009) continued to be reinforced by participant comments such as “the experience in it [VCAL] is the teacher of it” (Pierce – PARTNERSHIP). Parker’s (PARTNERSHIP) understanding of VCAL came as he taught in the program. He was hired mid-way through the school year and did not have an induction. Sindy (school) said “I have just muddled my way through it”. Sara (school) said that her aim was to
“survive this [her first experience of teaching VCAL] and to present something that is professional and engaging to keep these kids under control”. In lieu of preparation, Sadie struggled with “trying to get my head around implementing inquiry based learning”.

Phil and Perry (PARTNERSHIP) expressed similar views of being “really under prepared”. In Phil’s situation, his understanding of applied learning evolved as he taught. He did not have a formed understanding of applied learning when he first started teaching VCAL and is careful (during the interview) to only say his understanding is better now. Phil is of the opinion that “… the only way you learn in VCAL is by doing it and learning as you go ‘cause I don’t think the preparation that goes into staff teaching is adequate, to be honest”.

In the above examples, the learning on the job that participants experienced was not to enhance, extend or support formal structured learning, it was imposed on the participants due to the absence of adequate preparation. Nell (ACE) said that “learning on the job is very valuable if you have the support around you and have the help you need”. Nell would “hate to see any young teacher” in the position of being asked to teach VCAL without help and support. However the appropriate help and support for VCAL educators is not necessarily available, especially in settings where practice architectures do not understand the differences of VCAL.

Comments by VCAL educators reflect they learnt about their craft from informal, unstructured, frequently unsupported, self-directed learning. In this sense, their learning to be a VCAL educator can be regarded as applied learning. They transferred, adapted and applied experiences, skills and knowledge from other situations to the context of VCAL.

**VCAL educators as applied learners**
Some participants referred to themselves as applied learners (eg Nash (ACE) and Trevor (TAFE)) saying it is their preferred learning style. It is clear though, as
indicated in the preceding section, that all the educators in my research can be regarded as applied learners albeit self-directed ones. I compared their learning to the VCAA (2011b) principles of applied learning (p. 1). The educators’ learning started where they were at, that is, their learning commenced from that point when their current skills and knowledge were not adequate to support their teaching in VCAL. They learnt what they needed to know when they needed to know it – eg Sara (school) said she “went on an extremely steep learning curve staying about half a lesson in front of the students”. In lieu of adequate specific formal preparation, the educators learnt how to be a VCAL teacher through experience in authentic contexts. During the process of their everyday teaching work they reflected on past experiences, transformed meaning from those experiences (Mezirow 1990) and applied it to their real-time needs.

Unfortunately their ability to connect with communities of practice within their environment, an important component of applied learning, depended on whether existing ecologies of practice (Kemmis et al. 2014) in their respective locations constrained or supported teaching and learning in VCAL.

Educators’ stories detailed their survival, resilience and progress through their zones of proximal development as they learnt to teach in VCAL. Their self-worth developed from their own existing attributes, dispositions and qualities that in turn enabled self as a boundary object (see section self as a boundary object above). Their act of teaching was a real life task and their learning, during the act of teaching, encompassed every facet of working in VCAL, from students with challenging behaviours, to compliance with the VCAA quality assurance processes. Educators’ learning was hands on in that they learnt while they taught. The VCAL educators in my research were clearly applied learners, but without the benefit of a negotiated and planned curriculum and the assistance of a mentor/facilitator.

Learning from reflective practice
While Sara (school) may have struggled as she made the unfamiliar familiar, her
approach was not random or without structure. Her words “I looked at it [the problem of teaching in VCAL]” were significant. She undoubtedly made an effort to consider her challenges, her strengths, her aim and her resources and as a response took inventory of her experiences and her professional toolkit of teaching skills.

Sindy (school) clearly altered her practice as a result of reflection. Sue (school) agreed with me when I commented that her everyday practice was based on action research cycles of plan, act, observe and reflect. She said her colleagues’ practice was similarly reflective.

Preston (PARTNERSHIP) thought the best learning was done “on the job by constantly improving and reviewing your practice”. He also saw the interview with me as an opportunity for learning as it allowed him to “reflect on some of those things which you don’t have time for in the 9–5 rat race”.

As anticipated in the literature review VCAL educators regularly encountered problems, struggle and new situations in their everyday practice. The educators in this research demonstrated the ability to reflect on discontinuities and contradictions and identify new possibilities. As Dewey (1938) argues, this is when learning is optimised. At the time of reflection however, educators may not recognise the process as learning, but rather a means of survival. In doing so these educators reflected Knowles (1990) assumptions about adult learners, in particular the self-concept of participants caused them to take responsibility for their learning.

**Learning to draw on the advice and support of colleagues**
There was a strong emphasis in the data on the importance of collegial learning. Communities of practice are argued in literature as opportunities for learning (Knowles 1990; Lave & Wenger 1991). However, Hodkinson and Hodkinson (2004b) say that relationships between members affect the quality of collegial learning. Sue (school), found talking with colleagues about aspects of VCAL aided
her learning. Sue qualified her comment by saying that it was important that the VCAL colleagues who gave support and advice were “in it for the right reasons”. She had met educators at Quality Assurance events who were blasé about the applied learning programs they developed or did not necessarily understand what applied learning was in the context of VCAL. In some contexts, knowledgeable colleagues were not available, especially at the time VCAL was implemented. Phil’s (PARTNERSHIP) first experience of teaching VCAL was in a school and said even the VCAL teachers or the VCAL coordinators weren’t particularly helpful. I felt they didn’t have a really good grasp at the time of the whole concept of it.

Learning by collegial sharing can only happen if educators are willing to share (Billett 2001; 2001b), rather than acting as individual silos of knowledge. There was evidence that the participants in this study valued the sharing of knowledge. Preston (PARTNERSHIP) enjoys sharing “knowledge with other teachers at PARTNERSHIP” after attending professional development events. Paul (PARTNERSHIP) described his first experience of teaching VCAL in a school in which he and his colleagues learned about VCAL by “[i]n service[ing] each other” to learn as they went. Patrick (PARTNERSHIP) was clear that learning about VCAL from “others who have taught it” is very valuable.

Most participants from different ACE providers mentioned the importance of sharing with colleagues. In each instance their office layout was described and it was evident that the desk arrangements promoted the sharing of advice. Nell (ACE) said of the office space she and her fellow VCAL educators share … [w]e talk to each other all the time even to the point, if someone [a student] is having a bad day [teacher name] will come and say to me ‘ just be aware that you need to know that something has happened to this person and they might be a bit ratty today’.

Niles (ACE) said that the large open plan office space within which VCAL staff worked in his ACE was valuable and allowed conversations about assessment, welfare and the young people to take place when educators were not physically teaching.
we are all in a big office together and when we are not teaching we spend 50% of our time talking and some of that is personal and social – a lot of it is really debriefing [about their work as VCAL educators].

Ironically the strong collegial network which Niles and his colleagues shared also impacted on Niles’ participation in professional development due to the nature of the context in which he worked. At certain times his participation in professional development would result in heavier teaching demands on his colleagues or less teachers to manage the challenging behaviours of students. If that was the case he would forgo the professional development opportunity.

As already indicated Billett (2001) supports workplace learning while warning of the potential to result in “unintended and undesirable knowledge” (p. 114). In environments where the dominant paradigm of teaching and learning is teacher driven and based on transmissive teaching and learning; how can a counter cultural pedagogy resist and survive the effect of associated “sayings, doings and relatings” (Kemmis et al. 2014, p. 43 italics in original) that make up the existing ecology of practice? How do VCAL educators identify whom to trust and from whom to learn? What will they learn? These are questions providing other opportunities for research.

Learning to fit the teacher to the practice
There are two dimensions in fitting the teacher to the practice. One is the qualities and attributes of the educator that suit them to teaching VCAL; and the other is the disposition of the educator to learning new ways of doing things and being prepared to challenge existing practices. Billett (2001b) argues that learning requires a disposition, while Angus (2012) warns that teachers can be resistant to changing the theoretical foundations of their pedagogical practice.

Sindy (school) became a VCAL educator after being singled out by the VCAL coordinator, “the coordinator was looking for someone a little bit quirky”. Sally, a VCAL coordinator in a different school, said that she “handpicks” her VCAL educators and looks for certain qualities. She selects
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 work well with students who learn in a different way.

The view that not any one can teach VCAL was held by a number of educators. Sindy (school) said “I don’t think everyone can teach VCAL” while Sue (school) said “it takes a certain type”. Peter (PARTNERSHIP) initially thought that anyone could teach VCAL but later qualified his statement by saying “it’s not for everyone and it requires a larger skill set”.

Table 8.2 summarises the qualities, skills and attributes suggested by participants as being necessary to VCAL educators.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 8.2: Qualities, skills and attributes of VCAL educators</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participants mentioned the following as qualities, skills and attributes necessary for VCAL educators:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Lateral thinking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Flexibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ability to work well with students who learn in a different way</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Ability to work with students who do not like sitting in their seats and writing copious notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Quirky</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Sympathetic to VCAL</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Disposition inclined to experiential teaching</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong work ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Certain personality type (described in various narrative extracts)</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Having something within (described in various narrative extracts)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Note: participants cautioned not all teachers are suited to teach in VCAL)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It was clear that the ethos of several educators was integral to their ability to teach in VCAL. Sara made her VCAL teaching work by using “personal fortitude” (Landa 2008 cited by Akkerman & Bakker 2011). The determination displayed by Sara (school) and evidence of her strong work ethic were clearly qualities which contributed to her self-efficacy and the resultant development of [her]self as a boundary object. The irony is that many of the qualities that Sally (school) argues students in VCAL need, for example self-motivation, are also qualities, as demonstrated and articulated within the data, which the educators need.

Angus (2012) has already argued that a “critical ethnographic disposition [should] be cultivated in pre-service teachers” (p. 5). He believes this would
promote the ability of new teachers to value the possibilities of the local community in which they teach and the students live. He believes cultivation should be grounded in the context of youth cultures and an appreciation of difference. While he is advocating this preparation for all teachers, it is especially necessary for VCAL educators.

**Barriers to coordinating a boundary crossing response**

Akkermann and Bakker (2011) argue, “artifacts [sic] can fail as boundary objects when they do not fully or rightfully capture multiple meanings and perspectives” (p. 141). Among the boundary objects that Star and Griesemer (1989) identified in one particular research project were “repositories” (p. 410). In their research repositories were places where

> [p]eople from different worlds can use or borrow from the ‘pile’ for their own purposes without having directly to negotiate differences in purpose. (p. 410)

There are existing repositories of knowledge about VCAL from which any educators can borrow. These exist in the form of a comprehensive set of resources about VCAL freely available on the VCAA website and to which all educators who teach in the middle and senior years of school in Victoria should refer for curriculum guidance. These resources appeared underutilised by VCAL educators.

Just as there was little mention of formal preparation in teacher education courses being of benefit, there was also little reference to resources provided by the VCAA, VALA or other online sources. Very few educators mentioned accessing the VCAA VCAL documentation to aid their learning about the VCAL curriculum.

Sindy (school) was not aware of resources on the VCAA website. Neither was Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) aware the VCAA website might be useful to his learning. Sadie (school) searches for teaching resources and teaching ideas online but did not mention a particular source.
Nathan (ACE) had searched online in preparation for his employment interview. He specifically looked at both the VCAA documents and other online resources in his quest to understand VCAL and be conversant with VCAL prior to his interview. However Nathan believed that “there still aren’t a lot of resources online” and observed there were fewer resources available for VCAL than for his teaching in VCE.

There were also few references to accessing resources from the Victorian Association of Applied Learning (VALA), who work with the VCAA to provide information and professional development to applied learning educators. One exception was Paul (PARTNERSHIP) who had attended a VALA conference that had provided him with valuable information regarding the administrative and accountability requirements of VCAL. Another exception was Peter (PARTNERSHIP) who described going to VALA conferences to seek ideas for VCAL program content.

Despite the efforts of VALA and the VCAA to provide resources in support of VCAL teaching, there appears either a lack of knowledge about the existence of the resources or an inadequacy in the substance of the resources. This means that the existing infrastructure of VCAL which provides “[l]inks with conventions of practice” (Star & Ruhleder 1996 cited by Star 2010, p. 611) in the form of repositories of knowledge about VCAL is not working well and the need for maintenance becomes visible in this research.

**VCAL educators reflect on differences between practices**

As previously argued in Chapters One and Two the VCAL program is counter cultural to dominant teaching and learning paradigms and therefore contradictions and discontinuities are experienced by educators as they teach.

The interviews provided an opportunity for educators to reflect on their practice and several (not included in narrative extracts) referred to it as ‘therapeutic’ or “good to debrief”. Educators’ reflections on their learning journeys also revealed
evidence of “priori (known without prior experience) and posteriori knowledge (gained by experience)” (Chang, Benamraoui & Rieple 2014, p. 462).

Some contradictions experienced by VCAL educators were unexpected and not related to the counter cultural nature of the program. At PARTNERSHIP the curriculum content is based on a particular industry, and is mapped to both VCAL and VET learning outcomes. Unlike schools and TAFE where curriculum content is negotiated with students in keeping with the first VCAA principle of applied learning “start where the student is at” (VCAA 2011b) teaching and learning activities at PARTNERSHIP are devised before students enrol. This is because student interests and future aspirations are understood to align with the program they have selected. PARTNERSHIP educators are given materials which outline learning tasks and what students need to do. Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) said that “I have never received such a clear curriculum before”. However, the comprehensive curriculum was not enough to support Pierce’s preparedness to teach VCAL including his understanding of applied learning and the structure of VCAL.

More generally within the data was clear evidence of discontinuities or contradictions experienced by VCAL educators due to the way VCAL challenges dominant teaching and learning paradigms. As stated at in the section “VCAL educators identify difference sociocultural practices” VCAL educators did not necessarily identify sociocultural differences at the time they began teaching, they had to learn how to recognise pedagogical and other sociocultural differences. Star (2010) defines a boundary as “a shared space, where … that sense of here and there are confounded” (p. 603). She also acknowledges Dewey to say that “inquiry begins in doubt and ends when that tension is relieved” (Star 2010, p. 605). The participants began their VCAL practice in doubt and were confounded by the differences they encountered. Through inquiry and reflection they identified and came to understand the nature of those differences. In doing so their discombobulation caused by the friction between counter cultural pedagogical approaches eased.
Learning that vocational pathways are valued differently to academic pathways

In each of the provider settings the value and status of vocationally related education varies. Argument within literature (Argyris & Schön 1974; Blake 2009; Brown & Sutton 2008; Connell et al. 1982; Henry et al. 2003; Jenkins 2014; Pritchard & Anderson 2006) that academic pathways are valued differently to vocational pathways is reinforced in the data, particularly within school settings.

A contradiction exists in the setting of ACE. There was no indication from participants that the worth of VCAL or applied learning was a point on a continuum; it was simply accepted and valued as a pathway to reengage young people in education. Within the context of TAFE there is an example in Trina’s narrative which suggests VCAL is perceived as a commodity by the hierarchy but not by the educators. Each of these examples of sociocultural difference within and between context impacts in some way on the VCAL educators.

Wenger (1998) argues, “[p]articipation and reification can both contribute to the discontinuity of a boundary” (p. 104). He goes on to say the status of outsider can be reified in subtle and not so subtle ways ... ... nuances and the jargon of a professional group distinguish the inside from the outside as much as do certificates”. (p. 104)

Other teaching staff at Sindy’s school would comment “oh you’ve got VCAL again, you poor thing”. Sadie (school) explained the paradox arising from enrolling disengaged students in VCAL, a program that was intended to be engaging. Enrolled students frequently behaved poorly and did not commit to the program and by doing so contributed to the low regard, by others, of the program. Sadie described her school’s timetabling system and it was evident that the timetabling of VCE was privileged over the timetabling of VCAL.

Wenger (2000) has argued that communities of practice, for example the teaching profession,

  can steward a critical competence, but they can also become hostage to their history, insular, defensive, closed in, and oriented to their own focus. (p. 233)
This was evident in the data as Sara (school) said there had been a history at her school of perceiving VCAL poorly and she was determined to change that by careful record keeping and evidence of work so that student results were “highly defensible”. She said that an attitude at her schools was

[that anyone should pass VCAL. In fact anyone shouldn’t pass VCAL because you require quite a strong level of independence to get through VCAL.

Noel (ACE) acknowledged that “VCAL possibly does have a bad reputation” although he suggested that schools who think “dummies go through VCAL and smart kids go through VCE” perpetuate a poor stereotype of VCAL. Noel disagrees saying that in his setting they have students who could complete VCE but for a variety of reasons the students have “had that little hiccup in their lives and we are able to pick them up and get them back on track”. In the ACE in which Noel works they

just find that VCAL is better because it is hands on ... and it’s aimed at getting kids into work rather than further study.

As suggested in the literature review, workplace learning does not only encompass “correct” or “good” knowledge. Unexpected and unintended learning can occur which “will directly influence how individuals conduct their work” (Billett 2001, p. 114). For the educators it was not only learning that the program they were working in was devalued, it was learning that their applied learning pedagogical practices were also valued differently, especially in comparison to transmissive teaching approaches.

**Learning that applied learning is valued differently to didactic instruction**

Sally (school) recounted an experience where it was evident there was a perception that teaching by active learning was not as valued in the same way as didactic classroom approaches. During a social occasion with teaching colleagues, she recounted that her hospitality students had spent the afternoon completing serviette folding. The mathematics teacher present was dismissive of both Sally and her students’ efforts, making a point of saying in a
condescending manner, “ah Sally I’ve spent all afternoon teaching this high level maths”. The mathematics teacher’s statement is reflective of Edwards, Lunt and Stamou’s (2010) account of how “Midgley … analysed how differences in values can give rise to differences in where boundaries are drawn and the marginalisation of the less dominant group” (p. 30). Study, and thus teaching, of mathematics is frequently valued more highly than vocational programs, in part because the study of mathematics, when undertaken in programs such as VCE can enable students to enrol at university.

The availability of suitable teaching materials within a provider setting also reflects the degree to which applied learning experiences are understood or valued. The following section continues discussion of how applied learning is devalued by explaining how effective applied learning is sometimes thwarted within the setting in which it is delivered.

Learning that resources for applied learning programs are hard to access
Schwartzman (2010) has argued that to be effective, applied learning requires adequate resources. Sara (school) said “we had no money, not a cent, not a single cent, I had no budget, I had nothing”. Some VCAL programs include fundraising activities to meet VCAL Skills Strands learning outcomes and to fund subsequent learning activities. However, not all educators have the skills to develop and manage projects that integrate learning outcomes from more than one skills strand. I was told by one educator the budget for VCAL was allocated elsewhere within his school. Trevor (TAFE) specifically highlighted that applied learning needs resources, yet in his TAFE provider “you are bound by financial constraints as to what you can do”. Trevor manages the challenge of accessing materials by first arguing his case to management for funding. If that does not work, he relies on volunteers and networking with community organisations to form learning partnerships. The problem of funding was also mentioned by Nash in relation to ACE. He discussed a funding model which was based on actual attendance rather than enrolment. However, in ACE the student cohort is the
least likely to attend consistently for a range of reasons, including mental health and homelessness. However, without adequate funding how can teaching staff and a quality program be provided for students who do attend?

In Sindy’s school VCAL classes were “in the shed” which was shared with the woodwork teacher. The shed had no heating. Designating a shed as a VCAL classroom demonstrates a lack of knowledge and a stereotypical perception about VCAL and applied teaching and learning. VCAL learning outcomes are met through a range of activities across four Skills Strands, some of which include planning, writing and speaking. Constructivist teaching and learning can occur through group discussion and brainstorming. These activities need appropriate learning environments as the quality of the learning environment impacts on learning (Knowles 1990).

Sadie (school) had been teaching in a classroom she described as “hot, upstairs, too small, stuffy and the windows don’t open properly”. The fact the classroom was to be changed in the near future was more likely coincidence than recognition of the need for proper resources. Significantly, the school had traditionally situated the VCAL classroom near the special needs department, which sends a message about the school’s perception of students who undertake VCAL.

It was not only classroom resources to which reference was made. Nathan (ACE) was not familiar with VCAL before teaching it. Prior to his ACE employment interview he researched on line and said that while there were many resources available for VCE there were very few for VCAL. Resources in this sense means ideas on which programs are based, examples and already developed programs.

Resources also include support for student wellbeing. VCAL cohorts are frequently characterised by concentrations of individuals who require welfare support. This was not always available, for example, Niles (ACE) said his first
experience of teaching VCAL was in a setting where the provider told him “these are your classes you need to come and teach them”. After that he was on his own, “there was no welfare or anything like that”.

The existing infrastructure of VCAL is “[b]uilt on an installed base” (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996) in the form of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) which value the dominant pedagogical paradigm of transmissive instruction. Subsequently it “wrestles with the inertia of the installed base and [has] inherit[ed] strengths and limitations from that base (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996) and the need for reassessing the established base becomes visible in this research.

**Learning that VCAL requires students perceived as least motivated to have most agency**

Sally (school) made the observation that while VCAL was a reengagement program, many of the students who undertook it weren’t necessarily finding it easy to reengage. The nature of VCAL requires students to have a great deal of self-motivation. Sally said that VCAL can in fact be “harder for those kids as they are not organised. In VCAL you have to be organised and you have to be a self-promoter”; without those qualities students will struggle.

Nathan (ACE) commented that “the learning curve for VCAL [students] is much larger than even for VCE”. Trina (TAFE) supported both Sally and Nathan’s views, saying the perception that her cohort was suitable for VCAL reflected a lack of understanding of the curriculum “VCAL needs a fair bit of motivation and often that is what our students are lacking, especially the ones that aren’t wanting to do VCE”.

This contradiction provides a conundrum for VCAL educators’ professional practice. How do educators manage unmotivated students so they can participate and benefit from a reengagement program? The irony of VCAL is that applied learning requires greater action, activity and agency by the student
compared to the educator. This is counter to academic programs such as VCE where the educator generally demonstrates greater action, activity and agency than the student.

**Learning “the best” teachers are allocated to academic teaching and any teacher allocated vocational teaching**

This discontinuity is evident in the narratives of participants who worked in schools. Blake’s (2004) thesis includes examples of difference that the “exceptional teacher or the exceptional adult” can make in the outcomes for students who are considered at risk (p. 215). Several of his vignettes relate successes and good teaching in VCAL. In the vignettes are adjectives not traditionally used in describing a *good* teacher. Mick, a VCAL educator, is referred to by a colleague as someone who “can sometimes be a maverick … almost a rogue element” (p. 215). Blake’s (2004) vignettes provide examples that infer a good VCAL teacher includes “enthusiastic teachers that really care for them [the students]” and the difference in student outcomes that has made (p. 215). Given the challenging nature of the characteristics of a VCAL student cohort, it is disconcerting to identify in my research that the pool of educators available to teach VCAL are the ones remaining after the allocation of teachers to VCE subjects.

Sindy (school) provided the example that while the “VCAL coordinator attempts to tailor the VCAL staff to what she thinks the kids need”, management in her school “puts the best physics teacher in VCE physics etc and the rest of the teachers get put anywhere”. Many schools do not put new teachers into VCE where the curriculum content is prescribed, yet they do not hesitate to put new teachers into VCAL where it needs to be developed. Sadie (school) said “I was the new one [teacher] I got VCAL”. Sue (school) observed a high turnover of VCAL educators was evident each year when she attended Quality Assurance sessions. She said new teachers are “slotted in” to VCAL and subsequently those teachers attend Quality Assurance sessions to moderate their curriculum.
planning and validate the evidence collected of students meeting learning outcomes.

Nathan told me that he was the third or fourth educator to teach his students since July (we spoke in November). Sadie said there had been four or five numeracy teachers at her school in a three-year period. I know from conversations with other research participants, my university teaching, networking at VCAL professional development events and speaking to educators that these are not isolated examples and there is a high turnover of VCAL teachers. A high turnover of teachers challenges the capacity of VCAL providers to grow, share and maintain knowledge. Many teachers do not want to teach VCAL and may teach it under sufferance and transfer to other curricula at the earliest opportunity. It is a limitation of my research that educators who truly did not want, or failed in teaching, VCAL did not participate in my research to provide another perspective in the data.

Sally (school) argued that specifically advertising VCAL teaching positions in schools and tailoring Key Selection Criteria to the skills, knowledge and attributes required would be beneficial as it would increase the likelihood of VCAL programs being taught by willing educators. She said

... when they are employing people are still employing – straight academic people [advertising for specific VCE method areas] and tending to not want to employ for this area [not being specific about the qualities and skills needed to teach VCAL].

It is known that teachers are often employed out of field, that is they do not teach in their recognised method area, and are required to teach curriculum for which they hold no recognised qualifications (Hobbs 2014). However VCAL is a curriculum, not a method area and there is no qualification which recognises the wide ranging and unforeseeable knowledge skills and attributes required to teach the curriculum. Additionally VCAL curriculum challenges the dominant teaching paradigm in schools. As is evident within these findings, participants perceive not all teachers are suitable or able to teach in VCAL.
Learning the worth of pedagogical relationships

Barnett (2012) argues preparing student for unknown futures requires pedagogical approaches that prepare the person, rather than providing only knowledge, even generic knowledge. However a “pedagogy for uncertainty requires relatively open relationships between teacher and taught” (p. 75). It is evident that the pedagogical relationships participants have with their students vary between VCAL and other curriculum. For example Sindy (school) says that “I wouldn’t talk to my year 7s like I talk to the VCAL class … I think you have to be more relaxed around them [VCAL students] because really they could be out in the workforce”. Nathan (ACE) says “in VCAL more than anywhere else rapport is important”. He believes that his VCE students know where they are going and how to get there, while his VCAL student cohort has a “concentration of young people who struggle with self-esteem, self-image, self-belief and self-consciousness”.

Metcalfe and Game (2006) argue “[w]hen teaching works, it isn’t simply because teachers are kindly or knowledgeable (p. 3). They go on to suggest that the real results of pedagogical relationships are often unknown for a very long time. They relate how Betty Churcher’s teacher allowed her to stay in the art room for very long periods, instead of being in regular lessons. Betty Churcher went on to become the Director of the National Gallery of Australia. Sometimes unorthodox methods of teaching have a much greater impact than can be anticipated (Metcalf & Game, 2006, p. 15). Niles (ACE) observed, in his setting where many of his colleagues were qualified to teach VCAL but not necessarily trained teachers, they were doing as good or better job as the teachers I have met because they are really more about building relationships and understanding welfare issues and flexibility rather than educational outcomes.

However as Blake (2004) has already argued, teaching in VCAL and the forming of supportive pedagogical relationships is risky. Risky because both challenge the
traditional way that teachers have related to their students. As Barnett (2012) posited

... if students are expected to come into an educational situation of some risk, and so make themselves vulnerable, we can expect nothing less from their teachers. In pedagogical risk all are vulnerable. (p. 75)

Pedagogical relationships in VCAL are not only between educators and students. Relationships also encompass partnerships developed with industry, local employers and community groups which are necessary to facilitate real life learning experiences within authentic contexts. The partnerships take time to develop and require a certain personality skill set to seek out. Sara (school) was aware of the value and necessity of partnerships outside the provider setting and after her first year of teaching made the conscious decision to join a community service group, Rotary International. While not all educators may be comfortable connecting into their local communities it is a component, and thus requirement, of the VCAA (2011b) principles of applied learning.

The ease in forming partnerships and connecting into communities is affected not only by the disposition of the VCAL educators, but also by the culture of the organisation. Angus (2012) has argued that frequently schools focus on accountability, high stakes testing and performance constrains their disposition to connecting to community and subsequently

([l]ocal knowledge, locally generated, relevant curriculum and shared good teaching and learning practice tend to be disregarded. (p. 4)

The geographical location of the provider, such as whether it is rural, regional or urban also affects the ability of educators to form partnerships with local organisations. Sally said the geographical remoteness of her school meant no ready access to public transport. This in turn impacted on students’ ability to access work placement opportunities. In other communities it could be difficult to identify partnership opportunities due to lack of choice, or unwillingness of community groups to partner with the VCAL provider.
Learning to understand the differences in assessment practices between VCAL and other curriculum

There are significant differences between teaching in VCAL and other curriculum. A number of educators commented on the different pedagogical approaches they use as they move between curricula during their teaching day. For example, Sindy (school) commented that

[in VCE geography I walk into the classroom knowing the assessment tasks, in VCAL I don’t. While we try to differentiate in delivering VCE content we don’t/can’t in regard to the VCE assessment tasks and SACs [School Assessed Coursework]. In VCAL I can differentiate the delivery of the content and the assessment task.] 

Sue (school) said she felt sorry for educators who tried to teach VCAL in the same way they had been teaching other secondary school curriculum as “I think that you just can’t do it”.

Nathan (ACE) said that the differences between VCAL curriculum and other curriculum were not necessarily understood by all teaching staff. He described the contrast by comparing the shock an experienced educator might feel when beginning to teach VCAL as similar to that of a teacher who “taught English in a secondary school for 25 years” and then attempted to teach mathematics.

Trina (TAFE) made similar comments. When VCAL was introduced into the TAFE at which she work there was an expectation that teachers would instinctively understand the program and be able to teach in it. Teachers who had been teaching VCE were allocated VCAL teaching based on their previous teaching. However Trina noted

... [f]or teachers of VCAL subjects it wasn’t a straight transition from teaching VCE English to VCAL literacy, or oracy for that matter. That has been quite complicated.

The participants made reference to the content and assessment tasks when describing differences between teaching in VCAL and teaching in VCE. I identified this as a difference in Chapter One. As participants have particularly
mentioned the differences as significant I provide greater detail here. Appendix Four affords a comparison of curriculum components from the VCE and VCAL. For purposes of comparing the level of detail provided by the VCAA for curriculum content, I have used the Senior Literacy Strand skills unit of ‘Reading and Writing’ to provide an example of VCAL curriculum. The unit has a nominal duration of 100 hours. As indicated by the VCAA (2010), study at the senior VCAL level equates (and often includes) study options from the VCE 3 / 4 level (p. 2). I have selected Unit 3 in English as an example of VCE curriculum. In VCE Units 3 and 4 are known as a sequence and delivered over a period of one year. Unit 3 is delivered in the first semester and unit 4 is delivered in the second semester. Each unit should consist of at least 50 hours of classroom time. Thus the VCE curriculum content presented is intended to be delivered in half the timeframe of the VCAL unit.

From the example it can be seen that VCE educators are provided with very specific direction regarding program content and learning outcomes. VCE unit 3 is equivalent to one semester of study. The VCAL Senior Literacy Skills unit equates to two semesters of study. The guidelines for the VCAL unit provide less information for a considerably longer period of teaching time. It should be noted however, that the lack of prescribed content in the VCAL unit is in accord with the VCAA (2011b) principles of applied learning.

As learning outcomes and content for VCE subjects are prescribed by the VCAA, VCE educators are able to begin teaching from day one of the semester. On the other hand VCAL educators are provided with structure for each of the skills strands in the form of learning outcomes but no content to guide their teaching. In VCAL content is developed to align with student interests, needs and aspirations. Educators, together with their students, must first identify and negotiate appropriate projects, tasks and activities with which to meet the learning outcomes. The process relies on educators establishing respectful pedagogical relationships with their students to identify student interests and aspirations, so relevant projects and programs can be developed and instigated.
Like other educators, VCAL educators may have no previous knowledge of their students’ interests or abilities, but knowing their students’ interests is crucial to curriculum content planning. Likewise, engaging projects and partnerships are critical to successful VCAL programs. A challenge for both new and continuing VCAL educators is to identify potential for linkages into the community, or partnerships with local industry, through which they can develop projects, tasks and activities related to the interests and aspirations of their students.

Appendix Five provides a comparison of assessment components of VCAL and VCE curriculum. For purposes of comparing the level of detail given for assessment, I have used the Senior VCAL Literacy Skills Unit of *Reading and Writing* as an example of VCAL assessment. The study design for *English* (Unit 3) provides an example of VCE assessment. While both curriculum are designed by the VCAA and both assessment practices are robust, there are differences between VCE and VCAL approaches. Similar to the example in Appendix Four, guidelines provided to VCE educators are specific regarding content of assessment tools, assessment processes and assessment marking. The guidelines to VCAL educators provide learning outcomes for students but, as already indicated, do not dictate the specific tasks or content students must engage with in order to meet learning outcomes, nor do they indicate what evidence of assessment is to be collected. As indicated in Chapter One, development of VCAL programs also requires detailing of fair, reliable, valid and authentic evidence (physical artefacts) which will be collected to provide confirmation that each student has met learning outcomes (VCAA 2006; 2010; 2012). Tasks and evidence that students have demonstrated learning outcomes will naturally vary between VCAL providers. This is in contrast to the VCE program which culminates in standardised exams for all students at Unit 4 level.

Other VCE Study designs also demonstrate the high degree of specificity regarding the curriculum content, just as other VCAL curriculum would demonstrate the absence of specificity of content. Additional examples of VCE
Learning to adapt to an unsupportive environment
Organisational learning requires a supportive culture that promotes learning at all levels (Kemmis et al. 2014; Knowles 1990; Senge 2006; Watkins 2017). Teese and Polesel (2003) assert that effective schools have the greatest impact on student learning. Schools are made up of individual teachers; therefore, teacher quality must impact learning. Senge (1990) argues that

“[o]rganizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs. (p. 139)

It was evident the participants were learning to be VCAL educators, but many learnt in an unsupportive environment. Sindy (school) referred to having a supportive VCAL coordinator but a principal who was unreceptive to the inclusion of VCAL in the school curriculum saying, “this will not be a VCAL provider school”. On occasions, the VCAL cohort was ignored as being part of year 12 and had been forgotten when school photos were taken. Sara (school) described a school context where “[n]obody knew anything”, although later expanding this to say that the school administration “had no concept of the content ... and there was a staff member who knew a little bit”. There was also opposition to the introduction of VCAL “[p]arts of this school have resisted terribly – they are really angry about the loss of academic focus”. Sally (school) said that the perception of VCAL in her school suffered when during its implementation, there was “no money, no teachers, no preparation and no professional development for staff” and subsequently the introduction was poor and reinforced perceptions of vocationally related curriculum.

Trina (TAFE) thought the introduction of VCAL at her TAFE would have received more support from the organisation. Instead, she and her fellow VCAL educators were “kindof feeling our way”. The program manager had been keen to
introduce the program “but not really understanding the applied learning” implications on the professional practice of the educators delivering it. Her observations were similar to Niles (ACE) whose first experience of teaching VCAL was in a provider setting where he questioned the motives of the organisation in providing a VCAL program as “there was no support at all” and he subsequently “floundered so badly”. In his current organisation, he felt “very supported by management”.

Phil (PARTNERSHIP) found that VCAL staff in his previous school “weren’t particularly helpful” and he believed they, along with the principal, did not have a good understanding of VCAL. He thought the principal assumed “we all knew what VCAL was and how it worked”. Pierce (PARTNERSHIP) said something similar commenting, “I think there is an expectation that you will just sort of pick it up along the way”. These examples indicate that often there is no clear understanding by school leadership and colleagues that VCAL is different in both structure and pedagogical approach. As a result, staff at all levels need explanation of those differences. However, VCAL educators also require preparation that provides them with the pedagogical tools they need to teach.

Trevor (TAFE) argued that if VCAL is to work well, the existence of a cohesive environment in which staff are supported by each other and the leadership is necessary. His comment was supported by that of Sue (school) who also argued that good support from other VCAL educators who had been teaching VCAL and teaching it by choice was important. She clarified that not all collegial meetings of VCAL educators are supportive as some teachers are blasé about their approach to teaching VCAL and do not necessarily teach it using applied learning pedagogies.

The last characteristic of infrastructure that Star and Ruhleder determined was it “[i]s fixed in modular increments, not all at once or globally” (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996). They justify the characteristic by saying
because infrastructure is big, layered, and complex, and because it means different things locally, it is never changed from above. Changes take time and negotiation and adjustment with other aspects of the systems involved. (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996)

The existing infrastructure of VCAL means that VCAL is valued, understood and delivered according to dominant local pedagogical practices. This means that the sociocultural differences that characterise the VCAL program are ignored and unappreciated by other components of the VCAL infrastructure. Therefore, the local, embedded and enacted understanding is not reflective of the original planned understanding and intent of the curriculum. The need for investigating and reassessing local understandings and systems of VCAL becomes visible in this research.

Learning to embed self in teaching practice
Learning requires a disposition to change, learn and consider other ways of thinking and doing (Billett 2001b; Knowles 1990; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004b; Hostetler 2016). The degree to which participants experienced discontinuities and contradictions as they learnt how to teach VCAL was related to the educator’s disposition, their ability to identify with the cohort, their affinity with applied learning as a teaching and learning approach and the length of time they had been teaching VCAL.

While Sindy (school) described challenges she experienced when first teaching VCAL she also appeared to have a natural disposition to applied teaching and learning. Sara’s (school) experience, disposition and agency allowed her to create a successful VCAL program despite the challenges she experienced.

It was clear that for Phil (PARTNERSHIP) drawing on self as a boundary object, rather than organisational support facilitated his learning about VCAL curriculum. He said

it was only through me really wanting to know more about it and doing my own research ... I wouldn’t ever say that it was because I was ever informed or given information or anything like that.
While disposition impacts on educators’ ability to mediate between the familiar and unfamiliar, it also impacts on whether they see something as a contradiction or discontinuity. For example Nash (ACE) and Trevor (TAFE) were inclined to see themselves as educators, both stating that from young ages they had been involved in teaching in some way, for example in sporting teams. Significantly, both also identified as being comfortable with learning and teaching in a constructivist, experiential manner. Preston (PARTNERSHIP) agreed that his favoured learning style was reflected in his preferred hands on teaching style.

Noel (ACE) clearly had an affinity with learning that took place out of classrooms, saying his students

  don’t like sitting in the 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].

However in Noel’s case, an affinity with applied learning was not enough to overcome his feelings of being underprepared. Despite his unease Noel says teaching in VCAL “suits the type of person I am”. He believes he excels in teaching VCAL because of his own school experiences as a young person along with his range of life experiences and “I just enjoy what I am doing”.

While I have presented evidence here that both agency and disposition are important in the learning of VCAL educators, the words of Phil (PARTNERSHIP) are also worth considering

  ... I don’t think you could ever train someone to be a good – or to be an excellent applied learning educator without them having something within first but I think that applies to the whole teaching profession to be honest.

**VCAL educators transform their teacher practice**

I do not argue that all VCAL educators in this research transformed their teaching practice into a practice responsive and supportive of the planned (Marsh 2010) VCAL curriculum. Neither do I argue that all educators were using constructivist teaching and learning approaches, integral to applied learning in VCAL. I do however assert they all changed their practice in order to cope, survive and
teach. They coordinated their response to adapt, adopt, mediate and create hybrid practices. They met the requirement, imposed on them, to teach the VCAL program. In this sense they clearly boundary crossed and transformed their practice.

Kemmis et al. (2014) argue

\[ \text{we cannot transform practices without composing new ways of understanding the work, making it comprehensible in new discourses. (p. 6)} \]

The educators found new ways of understanding their existing professional teaching practice in order to recognize what it was they needed to do in their new VCAL practice. They reflected, drew on colleagues when able and utilised previous knowledge and experiences to make their work comprehensible.

Some educators described the transformation of their approach to teaching and learning in subtle ways. Two, Sara (school) and Phil (PARTNERSHIP) were more explicit in describing ways they overcame struggles they experienced. In particular, Sara’s account is useful as an example of transformation of practice as she also demonstrates an ability to use the Discourse (Charteris 2016) of applied learning.

Sara described her experience when beginning to teach VCAL as “horrendous ... [but] I did a very pragmatic thing”. Sue’s description of transforming her practice has three clear stages:

- First she recognised she was struggling and subsequently identified her need for learning
  ... at the end of last year. I had the six months of floundering around and I realised pretty quickly what I needed ...

- Secondly she completed a self-inventory of her skill set
  ... I had a good background – I had ESL I had adult learning I had applied learning – I had developmental learning and I had a strong background in boys’ learning because I had been at a boys school for the last 10 years - and most of these kids are boys and that has been very useful – all that background in boys education ...
• Thirdly Sara described a plan she formed for her own professional learning

...... *At the end of last year I realised that I need to get a really good handle on the outcomes, I needed to understand this community and how they could help. I joined Rotary I did a few things like that so that I could get a handle on what this community is about...*

Sara demonstrated ownership of her practice and self-directed her own learning in response to the discontinuities that she had experienced. Sara’s plan is significant as it describes and represents more than just a coping mechanism. She knew she had experience of adult and applied learning teaching strategies, on which VCAL is based, but understood there was more she must include in her practice. She clearly mentions two additional components to successful VCAL programs, understanding the curriculum structure (outcomes) and connecting with community organisations (VCAA 2011b). Sara instinctively understood her role as educator/facilitator required a proactive approach to networking. She said “I needed to understand this community and how they could help”. In attempting to understand the community she is also attempting to understand the resources she has at her disposal to support authentic learning experiences.

Transformation of practice not only requires understanding the Discourse (Charteris 2016) of VCAL, but also that appropriate resources are essential for effective applied learning (Schwartzman 2010).

*Soini, Pietarinen and Pyhältö (2016, p. 2) stress that “[l]earning requires teachers’ active agency”. Sara used active agency to reflect and form a plan. Mezirow (1990) argues that by interpreting our experiences and using our interpretation in future actions the “making meaning becomes learning” (p. 1). Sara used critical meaning making to guide her future decision making in order to transform her practice to meet her professional needs.*
Not all VCAL educators in this study were so proactive in their response to experiencing discontinuities as they encountered sociocultural differences. While most demonstrated agency in some way, not all were necessarily able to self-intervene in such a vigorous manner.

**Summary**

In this chapter I have positioned the participants’ teaching and learning experiences within the theory of boundary crossing to describe how they learned to be VCAL educators. I briefly revisited the dialogical stages of learning, introduced in Chapter Two, identified by Akkerman and Bakker (2011) when boundaries are crossed. I have provided examples from participants’ stories to align their workplace experiences to the phases of boundary crossing and described discontinuities, contradictions and opportunities for learning that educators experienced as they began to teach in VCAL.

I have argued the conceptualisation of self as a boundary object to describe one way educators coordinated their ability to teach while navigating movement from one curriculum to another. Educators established continuity of action by being willing to manage or challenge tensions and discontinuities between the characteristics of applied learning and the established practice architectures of the organisation within which they worked.

I assert there are several instances of the infrastructure (Star 2010) of VCAL being broken, requiring maintenance or requiring reassessment. Those instances are

- The VCAL educators in this study do not articulate connections to knowledge formally provided to them during their teaching qualification when describing how they learnt to teach VCAL. Instead, they comment on the lack of information about applied learning and VCAL during their teaching education courses. My data identifies the infrastructure of
preparing educators for working in VCAL is broken and in this research the breakdown becomes visible.

- The local embedded and enacted understanding of VCAL and applied learning is not necessarily reflective of the original planned understanding and intent of the curriculum. The need for investigating, reassessing local understandings and systems of VCAL becomes visible in this research.

- The applied learning nature of VCAL challenges practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) which value the dominant pedagogical paradigm of transmissive instruction. Subsequently VCAL “wrestles with the [counter cultural] inertia of the installed base” (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996). The need for reassessing and realigning the base as it has become established so it is able to support the pedagogy of VCAL becomes visible in this research.

- Despite the efforts of VALA and the VCAA to provide resources in support of VCAL teaching, there appears either a lack of knowledge among VCAL educators about the existence of the resources or inadequacies in their substance. This means that the existing infrastructure of VCAL which provides “[l]inks with conventions of practice” (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996) in the form of repositories of knowledge about VCAL is not working well and the need for maintenance becomes visible in this research.

In Chapter Nine I summarise my findings against each of the research questions. I argue how my findings contribute to existing knowledge, make recommendations and suggest opportunities for further research.
Chapter Nine: Professionally learning against the grain

To talk much and arrive nowhere is the same as climbing a tree to catch a fish
(Chinese Proverb)

Introduction

In Chapter One I explained the significance and warrant for my research and advised its limitations. In Chapters Two and Three I reviewed literature which positioned the learning of VCAL educators in the context of the VCAL curriculum structure and applied teaching and learning theories. I explained how boundary crossing provided language with which to describe the learning of the VCAL educators. I appraised literature which investigated everyday workplace, informal and adult learning, including the impact of life experiences and cultural dispositions. In Chapter Four I justified the research design and methodological approach. In Chapter Five, Six and Seven I provided extensive collections of narrative extracts relating the everyday workplace learning experiences of VCAL educators in a range of provider settings. In Chapter Eight I described themes evident in VCAL educators’ learning; at the same time positioning discussion within Akkerman and Bakker’s (2011) four dialogic stages of boundary crossing. I concluded that several components of the VCAL’s infrastructure have become broken, and as a result, require maintenance or review. The damaged infrastructure has created working conditions that are disruptive to VCAL educators’ professional learning.

In this Chapter, I summarise my findings and argue their potential implications against each of the research questions. I outline opportunities VCAL educators had for professional learning. I argue how my findings contribute to existing knowledge. I make recommendations from the findings and suggest opportunities for further research.
Learning at the boundaries

There is clear evidence in the data that for many of the participants their “sense of familiarity” (Wenger 1998, p. 98) with teaching, and how it is constructed, was shaken as they identified sociocultural differences in VCAL teaching practices. The disrupting of their established professional practice and ways of doing things resulted in discontinuities and contradictions, which caused educators to struggle. To work in the VCAL curriculum the participants knowingly or unknowingly coordinated a range of resources, including previous experiences and personal attributes to facilitate their own boundary crossing. They were either willing or forced to challenge existing practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) and through their own motivation, action, reflection and adapting available resources to their respective situations they themselves became boundary objects.

The educators boundary crossed into teaching VCAL and, by association, are VCAL teachers. I do not know however, whether their pedagogical practice is characteristic of applied learning as I did not observe their practice as part of this research.

Research questions

This case study makes the first significant contribution to understanding the nature of VCAL educators’ work and their learning as they struggle against entrenched practice architectures that are pedagogically counter cultural to those of applied learning and teaching. My research provided responses to the following questions of how VCAL educators learn to be VCAL educators.

How do VCAL educators learn about VCAL curriculum and facilitating applied learning?

Participants in this study did not value formal teacher preparation courses as a source of learning about VCAL and applied learning and teaching. Instead it became evident their endeavour of learning of how to be a VCAL educator occurred as they struggled to solve problems (Dewey 1938) and moved through
their own Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky 1978; Griffiths & Guile 2003) as a result of incidental and informal learning (Marsick & Watkins 1990; Marsick, Watkins & Lovin 2010). Their “personal fortitude” (Landa 2008 cited by Akkerman & Bakker 2011) enabled development of a hybrid practice (Akkerman & Bakker 2011) which allowed their teaching practice to continue despite sociocultural differences. Educators in this case study established “continuity [of] action” (Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 133) between differing curricula sites as a result of becoming their own boundary crossing object.

It was clear educators had taken time to critically reflect on their practice when responding to questions asking what knowledge and skills were lacking in their preparation to be a VCAL educator. Their answers voiced perceived solutions to difficulties educators had experienced while also being specific to the contexts in which they worked. Table 9.1 summarises their responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical knowledge and skills related to VCAL curriculum</th>
<th>Knowledge and skills associated with teaching in VCAL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Observing VCAL classrooms prior to teaching (Sindy, Sadie, Phil)</td>
<td>• Emotional intelligence/self-awareness (Nash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Knowledge of theoretical underpinnings of teaching in an applied way (Sindy, Sadie, Phil)</td>
<td>• Understanding of range of learning disabilities (Noel, Sindy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Understanding the structure of VCAL (Sara, Sadie)</td>
<td>• Communication skills (Sadie, Preston)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• How to teach literacy and numeracy skills in the context of VCAL (Sadie, Nash, Phil)</td>
<td>• Negotiating skills (Sindy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Shadowing/being mentored (Sindy, Niles)</td>
<td>• Managing aggressive behaviours (Noel, Nell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Mapping content to learning outcomes in VCAL skills strands (Sadie, Nathan, Phil)</td>
<td>• Counselling skills (Sindy, Noel)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Translating activities into learning outcomes skills (Phil, Parker)</td>
<td>• Understanding the illnesses of students and impact of medication (Sindy)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Project management skills (Sadie)</td>
<td>• Conflict de-escalation skills (Sadie, Noel, Nell)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Able to network and form community partnerships (Trevor)</td>
<td>• Mental Health first aid (Noel, Nash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• An ability to be flexible or think laterally while teaching (Sindy, Sally, Nell, Phil)</td>
<td>• Understanding and dealing with Alcohol abuse (Noel, Nash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Understanding and dealing with domestic violence (Nash)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Managing their own wellbeing as dealing with a challenging cohort is stressful (Noel)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The list in Table 9.1 is quite extensive. The knowledge and skills are evenly divided between two categories. The first category concerns technical knowledge and skills directly related to VCAL. The second category concerns knowledge and skills associated with challenging behaviours and diverse learning needs exhibited by students in their VCAL cohorts.

The desired technical knowledge includes knowledge and skills that it is reasonable to expect would be included in formal teacher preparation, for example understanding the structure of VCAL and knowledge of the theoretical underpinnings of VCAL. Educators from all settings had suggestions of technical knowledge they desired regardless of their previous teaching experience or preparation.

The second category of knowledge and skills associated with teaching in VCAL is diverse. Interestingly while ACE and TAFE are regarded as having the highest concentration of young people with challenging behaviours, the educators who made the suggestions concerning student management are not confined to those settings and include educators from schools and PARTNERSHIP.

Therefore, regardless of where educators worked, their formal preparation or their teaching experience, the capacity they brought to their practice was not adequate to respond to sociocultural differences they experienced as they worked in VCAL.

What are the wider implications of this finding?
The 20 VCAL educator narratives included in this case study came from a range of VCAL provider settings and similar stories were evident across settings. Similar themes were also evident in the seven interviews not included in this thesis. Therefore, it is reasonable to suggest many other VCAL educators learn by haphazard struggle in less than ideal conditions. This means educators are professionally learning against the grain (Boomer 1985) in circumstances not conducive to learning.
Kemmis et al. (2014) have argued transforming practice requires reimagining of practice architectures on cultural-discursive, material-economic and social-political levels (see discussion in Chapter Two). The responsibility for transforming of teacher centred practice to student-learning centred practice is not the isolated responsibility of individual VCAL educators. Transformation of practice should be part of a wider review of VCAL infrastructure. This would ensure preparation of educators for working in VCAL is supported by organisational learning in all three dimensions described by Kemmis et al. (2014). I mean this to include pre-service teacher education providers, the Department of Education and Training, the VCAA, all organisations that oversee, or are associated with VCAL provision and VCAL providers.

**What consequences does context have on the professional practice or learning of VCAL educators?**

Throughout this thesis, I have drawn on literature to argue teaching and learning in VCAL is counter cultural to the dominant pedagogical paradigm presented within existing practice architectures. My argument is consistently supported by data evidence.

Context and environment have consequences on learning (Billett 2001; Boud, Cohen & Walker 1993; Cole 2004; Cooper, Orrell & Bowden 2010; Fiol & Lyles 1985; Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Kemmis et al. 2014; Peterson 2002; Senge 2006). It is clear within the data the sociocultural differences experienced by VCAL educators hindered, hampered and impeded their practice and learning. Frequently management and leadership groups resisted or devalued the VCAL program and did not respond to sociocultural differences. Negative perceptions created by leadership and management groups were reified by other educators, students and parents. VCAL educators speak of being regarded as lesser teachers, even when their workload also includes non-VCAL teaching. Schwartzman (2010) has argued that effective applied learning requires quality resources. VCAL educators and programs are marginalised in accessing quality
resources such as appropriate classrooms and funding. The material-economic dimension (Kemmis et al. 2014) of VCAL obviously challenges existing ecologies of practice within provider settings which are geared towards teacher-centred models of learning.

**What are the implications of an unsupportive context?**

An unsupportive context is not conducive to building the capacity of VCAL within organisations. Organisational learning depends on a supportive culture that involves learners in their learning and an all levels learning approach (Kemmis et al. 2014; Knowles 1990; Senge 2006; Watkins 2017).

It is clear that existing practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014) are being reproduced rather than transformed to adapt to the new order of conceptions (Dewey 1938) about learning needed to support the success of the VCAL program. As indicated in Chapter Eight, VCAL “wrestles with the [counter cultural] inertia of the installed base” (Star 2010, p. 611 citing Star & Ruhleder 1996) of its infrastructure.

The new ways of doing argued by Kemmis et al. (2014) as being necessary for transformation of practice are not supported by corresponding disruptions to the existing dimensions of practice within the context of VCAL. The cultural-discursive dimension has not been renovated to engage with constructivist theories of teaching and learning. This is evident in participant descriptions of the material-economic and social-political dimensions. Educators describe resistance and poor perceptions of VCAL within provider settings and a lack of resources. Without maintenance to the cultural-discursive dimension of VCAL’s infrastructure no understanding will be forthcoming as to the associated need for review of the material-economic dimension. Without adequate resources applied learning is not effective (Schwartzman 2010). If applied learning is not seen to be effective the social-political dimension will not change.
What professional discontinuities or contradictions do VCAL educators experience as they teach VCAL?

VCAL is a policy response to the vocationalism of education (Knipe et al. 2003; Marginson 1997); in order to increase economic capital, yet vocationally related education is poorly valued (Argyris & Schön 1974; Billett 2001, 2003; Blake 2009; Bleazby 2015; Connell et al. 1982; Henry et al. 2003; Jenkins 2014; Pritchard & Anderson 2006). It was evident that VCAL and the educators who teach it are devalued by colleagues and school leadership and that their VCAL programs were ineffectively resourced. Subsequently the informal learning of VCAL educators took place in less than ideal circumstances “not of their choosing” (Blake 2016).

Educators in this study frequently expressed a view they had the poorest classrooms (eg hot, stuffy, shed) and their VCAL classes were not always considered in school administration (eg the taking of school photos, allocating of teaching loads or timetabling). The counter cultural pedagogical nature and the effect of the social-political dimension of VCAL permeates into all aspects of VCAL educators’ work.

Perceptions exist of VCAL as a dumping ground for both students and staff. Paradoxically, VCAL is described by the educators who teach it, as requiring students to demonstrate high levels of organisation and self-discipline. VCAL educators are bombarded with contradictions and discontinuities as they attempt to negotiate sociocultural differences.

What does this mean for existing and future VCAL educators?

Learning is not always positive and fruitful (Billett 2001). Lave and Wenger’s (1991) work on learning supports a view the process of learning is dependant on several relationships. The first relationship is that between the learner and educator/teacher/mentor, and the second relationship is between the learner and the environment in which the learning opportunity is situated

... learning only partly – and often incidentally – implies becoming able to be involved in new activities, to perform new tasks and functions, to master new
understandings. Activities, tasks, functions and understandings do not exist in isolation; they are part of broader systems of relations in which they have meaning. These systems of relations arise out of and are reproduced and developed within social communities, which are in part systems of relation among persons. (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 53)

In addition to learning about their craft, participants in this research were also learning they and their work in VCAL is not valued in the same way that work in other senior years’ programs is valued. The VCAL educators learnt that paradoxes and contradictions existed within the relational architectures of their professional world and were reproduced within the very communities that should be supporting them. In the social-political dimension (Kemmis et al. 2014) the VCAL program and VCAL educators are devalued. In a material-economic dimension (Kemmis et al. 2014) they are under resourced. In a cultural-discursive dimension (Kemmis et al. 2014) there is evidence of reticence at all levels to engage in the Discourse (Charteris 2016) of applied learning within the infrastructure that should be supporting the program. No wonder the turnover of VCAL educators appears high. Who would want to be a VCAL educator? Especially as “nuances … distinguish the inside from the outside” (Wenger 1998, p. 104) to the extent that VCAL educators become outsiders in their own profession.

*What opportunities do educators have for professional development to support their ongoing VCAL practice?*

The data shows that VCAL educators’ dominant form of learning about their practice is through informal processes. This does not mean there were no opportunities for professional development.

During the interview conversations, educators were asked how they access professional development. Before summarising their responses it is important to describe the inter-connectedness of a number of variables. The variables relate to the way, in interviews, this question was answered by educators, the range and nature of provider contexts participants represented, eg school, ACE, TAFE
or PARTNERSHIP and my own lack of specificity, during the interview about the type of professional development. Other variables which impacted on the educator’s response include: the employment tenure of the participant, eg full time, part time or casual; the educator’s existing professional tool box of teaching and learning strategies and the educator’s life experiences. Other variables are the educator’s existing disposition to teaching challenging students and their affinity with using applied teaching and learning pedagogical approaches.

Some educators spoke about professional development desirable to support VCAL practice in a technical sense. An educators’ need or motivation to seek out and determine the availability of professional development varied according to their recall of their first exposure to VCAL or challenges they experienced in teaching it. For example, Peter (PARTNERSHIP) was an experienced VCAL educator and his responses to questions were reflective of his formed identity and knowledge of VCAL at the time of the interview. There was nothing in the transcript which suggested a desire, or lack of desire, to attend professional development. Therefore it is natural he made no mention of availability of professional development or the opportunity to attend.

In schools, ongoing employed teachers such as Sadie were able to attend professional development to meet their learning needs albeit, in her case, after she commenced teaching VCAL. Her attendance was paid for and a replacement teacher would cover her classes. Trina in TAFE was a casually employed educator with a full time teaching load but with no professional development preparation for VCAL. While she could attend professional development the contradiction was

... I fund it myself and don’t get paid for it and lose a day of teaching on top of that. So you do feel like the odds are stacked up against you.

Trina’s comments reinforce arguments that casual educators are marginalised in the area of professional development (Forward 1999; 2000; 2005; 2007).
In ACE the contradictions were different again. Niles, who worked at one of the three ACE providers represented in this study, said staff were “provided a fair amount of professional development”. However Niles would not attend professional development if his absence placed a greater workload or strain on his colleagues. This is because he and his colleagues worked with a cohort of young people whose behaviours were particularly challenging. If he was absent, the number of staff available to manage student behaviours was reduced.

Nathan had two part time teaching jobs, one of which was teaching VCAL at an ACE. He taught VCE elsewhere. He found it “difficult to go to professional development because of my schedule” as he would need to schedule the professional development for a time he was not teaching, otherwise he would lose pay. To compound his situation, as a beginning VCAL teacher he did not yet “know what would help me”.

Between contexts there were differences in the type of professional development opportunities that were being sought. Sadie, in a school, was mainly seeking professional development that assisted her in the technical aspects of VCAL such as mapping content to VCAL Skills Strands’ learning outcomes. Niles, working with concentrations of disengaged young people in the adult learning environment of ACE, said staff were seeking professional development related to student welfare.

The relevance of available professional development also depended on the length of time that a provider had been delivering VCAL. Niles’ ACE was one of the first providers of VCAL and as both he and the provider had “been in there from the start” he described “plenty of VCAL opportunities, but we are finding that it is really repetitive”.

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In PARTNERSHIP, industry specific VCAL programs are provided and the model of education delivery is predicated on applied teaching and learning. The transcripts of the PARTNERSHIP participants suggest that the organisation’s business model is based on a one size of professional development fits all approach. All staff undertook similar preparation during two weeks at the beginning of the school year. PARTNERSHIP’s delivery model meant one educator worked with a student cohort in a geographical location some distance from other educators and their cohorts. Once teaching commenced there was limited opportunity for individual professional development, and at the time of the interviews, limited budget. Staff, on one day per week, depending on their location, gathered with other PARTNERSHIP educators for administration and professional interaction. A number of PARTNERSHIP educators (for example Phil, Pierce, Perry, Patrick) mentioned collegial gatherings as important for learning and sustaining their practice. There was also evidence that individual PARTNERSHIP educators (Preston, Perry) who were able to attend professional development subsequently shared knowledge with their colleagues.

In summary, it is evident that a range of variables have influence on accessing professional development and more questions are raised than are able to be responded to in this thesis. For example, how are educators’ learning needs affected by the context in which they teach and their already formed knowledge and identity? How are availability and opportunity defined and connected to the above variables? Professional development of VCAL educators is an area requiring further research and is included in the section discussing possibilities for further research.

**Learning to be a VCAL educator through haphazard struggle**

The learning described in this thesis is the everyday informal workplace learning of VCAL educators. It is increasingly being recognized that informal learning “is considered an important source for establishing a sustainable change aimed at achieving individual and organizational goals” (Kyndt et al. 2014, p. 2391). At the
same time knowledge about the learning outcomes of informal learning is scarce (Kyndt et al. 2014, p. 2393 citing Clarke 2005) along with how to determine what is actually learned when informal learning occurs (McNally, Blake & Reid 2009; Van Noy, James & Bedley 2016).

The educators in this study clearly drew on and adapted knowledge and skills from other contexts in which they had previously worked. Mezirow (1990) calls this thoughtful action (p. 6 italics in original). Much of that knowledge could be regarded as informally learned and so, contrary to the arguments of Van Noy, James and Bedley (2016) informal learning does not act as a limitation as it is able to be transferred. However transferring knowledge is dependant on ability to process and transform the learning from the original context. Mezirow (1990) calls this communicative learning (p. 8 italics in original), when learners search “often intuitively, for themes and metaphors by which to fit the unfamiliar into” (p. 9).

**Revisiting VCAL original specifications and maintenance logs**

It has been previously recognised applied learning pedagogies required different skills sets (Bottoms, Presson & Johnson 1992; Parker et al. 2015, p. 92). Over 25 years ago the Finn (1991) report argued the inclusion of workplace attributes into youth learning programs was “dependent upon the capacity ... of teachers” (p. xi) and warned of the need for pre-service teacher education to adapt and the requirement for ongoing professional development. Evaluation of the VCAL program has also argued that VCAL educators must have appropriate preparation and ongoing support (Henry et al. 2003, p. 18). Soon after implementation of the VCAL program Knipe et al. (2003) called for greater support for VCAL educators. In 2005 a recommendation was include in the Appraisal for Standards for Registration of VCAL Providers that ongoing “professional learning and support” are critical for successful VCAL programs (Walsh et al. 2005). Unfortunately, evidence from my research project shows VCAL educators do not believe their pre-service teacher training preparation
provided them with the pedagogical skills to use applied learning teaching and learning strategies and they believe they are lacking in ongoing support.

This is not the only sign of damage to the infrastructure of VCAL that becomes visible in this research. Other necessary maintenance includes:

- reassessing local understandings and systems of VCAL
- reassessing and aligning the established practice architectures to support the pedagogy of VCAL
- re-evaluating linkages to existing repositories of knowledge about VCAL.

**Opportunities for future research**

The results of this study are able to provide the basis for further research aimed at improving individual learning and organisational capacity. One pressing issue is to grow VCAL educators’ ability to apply their knowledge of theory to their practice of teaching. An approach could be (drawing on an inquiry conducted by Loveless 2000, p. 338) to “understand how the knowledge that underpins [non-applied learning inclined] teachers’ pedagogical practices interacts with” the requirement for those teachers to deliver applied learning programs such as VCAL. An action research, or interventionist, approach working with VCAL educators in their teaching setting could empower participants by developing and supporting their applied learning pedagogical practice. This approach would benefit both experienced and beginning teachers as they start to teach VCAL.

Other research questions raised by this study include:

- Why do resources (boundary objects) provided by VCAA and VALA appear underutilised?
- What types of VCAL curriculum (espoused, planned, enacted and experienced) curriculum are observable in VCAL provider settings?
- What is the reason for the high turnover of VCAL educators?
- How can the high turnover of VCAL staff be slowed to enable organisational capacity to increase?
Recommendations

From interpreting the data, it is clear that the conditions in which VCAL educators learn would improve with renovations to all three dimensions of practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014)

- In the cultural-discursive dimension: recognising and valuing the sociocultural differences of VCAL. Encouraging and providing opportunities for greater engagement in the Discourse (Charteris 2016) of VCAL amongst stakeholders at all levels.

- In the material-economic dimension: reviewing components of pre-service teaching qualifications relating to applied learning and technical knowledge of VCAL. Requiring a specialist qualification to teach VCAL. Providing professional development opportunities to align with VCAL educators learning needs related to their cohort and context. Supporting VCAL programs by recognising that effective applied teaching and learning requires suitable resources in the form of funding, materials and partnerships with industry and community groups.

- In the social-political dimension: disrupting the inequity between pathways that are regarded as academic because they more quickly lead to university study and those that are regarded as vocational. Both pathways can lead to work and vocations, while either pathway is able to lead to university study. A contradiction is that vocations achieved through university are regarded as having greater status. Status is associated with power. However, power is relevant. Who has the most power during a plumbing emergency, a plumber or a lawyer?

Conclusion

The implementation of innovative education programs frequently lack attention to the simultaneous preparation of educators to teach in those education programs, especially when unfamiliar teaching and learning approaches are used (Chalmers & Keown 2006). The success of engagement programs such as VCAL,
that is, students’ ability to transform their learning by transferring it to a range of different contexts, greatly depends on the ability of educators to develop and enact VCAL curriculum in the way it was intended and planned. Pre-service teacher preparation courses only provide a foundation for teacher practice rather than a completed model (Kirby 2009) and as shown in this research appear inadequate in relation to teaching in VCAL. Nevertheless consolidated teacher practice learning occurs as educators start to teach. However, without learning capacity in VCAL provider settings, how will new-to-VCAL educators learn? Importantly how will educators learn espoused applied learning theory and planned curriculum program approaches as intended by the VCAA?

The VCAL program is an intervention program. It intervenes to support those most at risk (Blake 2009; Harrison 2006; Henry et al. 2003; Pritchard & Anderson 2006) and as a response to the vocationalism (Knipe et al. 2003; Marginson 1997) of education. One of the outcomes of the intervention, as evidenced by data, is the marginalisation of the educators. Educators are marginalised by VCAL being counter cultural to existing practice architectures (Kemmis et al. 2014). Marginalisation occurs across all three dimensions of the practice architecture: low perceptions of vocational education, lack of adequate resources, lack of teacher preparation in theories and practical applications of constructivist theories of teaching and learning, colleagues and managements’ lack of understanding of applied learning pedagogies and lack of educator preparation to teach challenging cohorts of students. This is not surprising as Bauman’s (2001; 1998) work illustrates that when boundaries shift, as they do during education restructuring, they do not disappear there is a reformation of separation and exclusion boundaries. Educators frequently bear the brunt of reform implemented at all levels as they are most affected in responding to new policies and accountability structures (Hodkinson & Hodkinson 2004; Marsh 2010).

In this thesis I have used the notion of boundary crossing to explain the learning experienced by VCAL educators as they transition into teaching the VCAL
program. Educators, whose stories are told in this thesis, have related how they established continuity in practice, “rather than overcoming or avoiding the difference itself” (Akkerman & Bakker 2011, p. 136). To negotiate the sociocultural differences that exist between teaching programs they have drawn on previous professional practices, utilised life skills and experience and summoned personal fortitude to make the unfamiliar, familiar. It is evident however that many VCAL educators in this study, along with the management in their provider settings, are unsure and uncertain about VCAL and applied learning. This reflects Ball’s (2003) argument that education reform produces “uncertainty and instability” (p. 221).

VCAL is a result of a vocational reform agenda aimed at increasing the employment prospects for young people (Blake 2004). The program also has the potential for young people who participate in it to gain social, economic and cultural capital. In order to achieve this it is vital management and leadership teams within provider settings understand and respond to the resource intensive nature of the VCAL program. This is done through provision of adequate funding along with assistance in identifying and maintaining community and industry partnerships. Additionally VCAL educators must be well prepared and informed about the pedagogical foundation of the VCAL program with access to ongoing professional learning opportunities.
Postscript – 11 March 2017

The gestation period of birthing a thesis is worrisome in case time dulls the currency of data. However, I continue to hear and read stories that reinforce my findings.

In recent days, two newspaper articles (“Breaking Ranks” The AGE, 27 Feb 2017 and “They see us as the dumb ones” The AGE, 11 March 2017) continue to highlight broken, fractured dimensions of VCAL.

The “Breaking Ranks” article tells of a young person whose school encouraged him not to do VCE, despite the student wanting an ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admissions Rank) so that he could attend university. Schools pressure students with poorer grades to do VCAL so that the school’s performance data and ranking can be improved. Subsequently the pathway the student was encouraged to take was for the school’s benefit, not that of the student.

The “They see us as the dumb ones” article relates perspectives from two former VCAL students that young people undertaking VCAL were seen as dumb and the VCAL program was looked down upon. A principal at a community school related how some schools marginalise VCAL by not providing adequate resources and quality teachers.

The Department of Education and Training described VCAL as “well established pathway” (The AGE 11/3) but unfortunately it is also well established that terms used to describe VCAL in the wider community include “pathway for dummies” (The AGE 11/3). As argued in my thesis, stakeholders at all levels must re-examine ways that VCAL and applied learning are understood and, in doing so, critically challenge their own held beliefs. This requires more than the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority’s defence of a “robust quality assurance process” (The AGE 11/3). This requires widespread understanding of, and respect for, the firm educational theory base of teaching and learning in VCAL.
Appendix 1: Original Interview Questions

Can you tell me about:

- your current teaching position?
- your training and preparation for your current position?
- how long you have been working in schools, ACE or TAFE?
- what did you do before working with young people in years 11 and 12?
- how you feel about your preparation for teaching years 11 and 12?
- what other preparation do you believe would be useful?
- how you access professional development?
- the usefulness of professional development that you have undertaken?
- how technology has affected your practice?
- how you cope with change in your practice and workplace?
- how you learn ‘what you need to know’ to respond to change in the workplace?
- what skills (other than teaching) you need and use?
- the level of satisfaction you get from your work
- if your employment tenure (fulltime, part-time, casual or sessional) impacts on your practice and if so, how that comes about?
- how the employment tenure of your colleagues impacts on you or the workplace?
- how your employment tenure impacts on your need of, or access to, professional development?
- about alternative ways you meet your learning needs (other than formal professional development)?
- how your learning needs were identified and met in other schools, TAFE or ACE?
- about the usefulness of professional development you have undertaken in other schools TAFE or ACE?
- how you think the education of young people is being managed between schools, ACE and TAFE, including how they communicate regarding their year 11 and 12 programs?
- the most challenging aspect of being an educator of young people who learn in multiple institution settings?
Appendix 2: Amended Interview Questions

Can you tell me about:

- how long you have been working as an educator in any setting (including your path/s since leaving school)?
- your current teaching position?
- how you feel about your preparation for teaching VCAL?
- Your experiences of teaching using Applied Learning pedagogy
- The difference/s in teaching VCAL compared to ‘other’ teaching you may have done.
- what other preparation do you believe would be useful to teach VCAL?
- what skills do you think you use in Applied Learning – how did you get them?
- the level of satisfaction you get from your work
- About the young people that you work with?
- the most challenging aspect of being a VCAL educator?
## Appendix 3: Research participants by sector

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACE</th>
<th>PARTNERSHIP</th>
<th>TAFE</th>
<th>SCHOOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nash</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>Trevor</td>
<td>Sadie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nell</td>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Trina</td>
<td>Sally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Niles</td>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>Tess</td>
<td>Sara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nita</td>
<td>Perry</td>
<td></td>
<td>Seth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel</td>
<td>Preston</td>
<td></td>
<td>Steff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Pierce</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nathan</td>
<td>Parker</td>
<td></td>
<td>Sue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Peter</td>
<td></td>
<td>Stacy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Sindy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: All names are pseudonyms
## Appendix 4: VCE/VCAL Curriculum Content Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VCE – English– Unit 3</th>
<th>VCAL – Literacy Skills: Senior Reading and Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>=50 nominal teaching hours (equates to one semester of study)</td>
<td>= 100 nominal teaching hours (equates to one year of study)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Source:** VCAA, 2006, p 24-27

**Area of Study 1**

**Reading and responding**

This area of study focuses on the reading of a range of literary texts to develop critical and supported responses. Students examine the structures, features and conventions used by authors of a range of selected texts to construct meaning. They identify, discuss and analyse these in order to explain how meaning is constructed through textual elements such as language and images. They also examine the ways in which the same text is open to different interpretations by different readers; for example, the ways in which a text can be read differently in a different time, place or culture. They describe and analyse the way in which social, historical and/or cultural values are embodied in texts, and develop oral and written responses to a selected text, using appropriate metalanguage. The term ‘selected text’ refers to a text chosen from the list of prescribed texts in Text List 1 published annually in the VCAA Bulletin.

**Outcome 1**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse, either orally or in writing, how a selected text constructs meaning, conveys ideas and values, and is open to a range of interpretations. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills outlined in area of study 1.

**Key knowledge**

This knowledge includes

- an understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed by the author and presented in the selected text;
- the structures, features and conventions used by authors to construct meaning in a range of literary texts;
- methods of analysing complex texts and the social, historical and/or cultural values embodied in texts;
- the ways in which the same text is open to different interpretations by different readers;
- strategies and techniques for constructing a supported analysis of a text, including a knowledge of the metalanguage appropriate to the analysis and to the text type;
- key elements of oral language conventions and usage in a range of text types;
- features of spoken texts which successfully engage

**Summary of Learning Outcomes**

To allow for specialisation, student must show competence in seven of the eight learning outcomes although they should cover all learning outcomes in the teaching/learning context.

1. **Writing for Self Expression**
   Write a complex recount, narrative or expressive text.

2. **Writing for Practical Purposes**
   Write a complex instructional or transactional text.

3. **Writing for Knowledge**
   Write a complex report, explanatory or expository text.

4. **Writing for Public Debate**
   Write a complex persuasive, argumentative or discursive text.

5. **Reading for Self Expression**

**Content summary**

“Content and underpinning knowledge relevant to each learning outcome can be found in the learning outcome details. The learning outcomes should be covered in a context and through subject matter that is relevant to the student. A range of different text types or genres should be covered in each learning outcome. Although it is only necessary to cover one text type to show competence of a learning outcome, the learning situation should allow students to develop competence in reading and writing a range of text types.”

**Summary of Learning Outcomes**

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1. **Writing for Self Expression**
   Write a complex recount, narrative or expressive text.

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   Write a complex instructional or transactional text.

3. **Writing for Knowledge**
   Write a complex report, explanatory or expository text.

4. **Writing for Public Debate**
   Write a complex persuasive, argumentative or discursive text.

5. **Reading for Self Expression**
Appendix 4
VCE/VCAL Curriculum content comparison

audiences;
• techniques for managing feedback and leading discussion;
• the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

Key skills
These skills include the ability to
• critically analyse texts and the ways in which authors construct meaning;
• analyse the social, historical and/or cultural values embodied in texts;
• discuss and compare possible interpretations of texts using evidence from the text;
• use appropriate metalanguage to construct a supported analysis of a text;
• plan and revise written work for fluency and coherence;
• apply oral language conventions in a chosen oral text type;
• engage an audience through interested and varied language use;
• respond to audience interest and engagement;
• use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

AREA OF STUDY 2

Creating and presenting
The focus in this area of study is on reading and writing and their interconnection. A list of prescribed Contexts will be published annually in the VCAA Bulletin. The same Context should be the focus of study in both Units 3 and 4. Two texts, one in Unit 3 and one in Unit 4, will support this area of study. These texts must be selected from the list of prescribed texts in Text List 2 which will be published annually in the VCAA Bulletin. In addition to these selected texts, teachers are encouraged to consider student interests and to support the achievement of the outcome by providing students with opportunities to read other texts – print, non-print and multimodal – that explore ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context. Students will read these texts in order to identify, discuss and analyse ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context. They will reflect on the ideas and/or arguments suggested by these texts, explore the relationship between purpose, form, audience and language, and examine the choices made by authors in order to construct meaning. Students will then draw on the ideas and/or arguments they have gained from the texts studied to construct their own texts. They write for a specified audience and purpose and draw on their experience of exploring texts to explain their own decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context.

Outcome 2
On completion of this unit the student should be able to draw on ideas and/or arguments suggested by a chosen Context to create written texts for a specified audience and purpose; and to discuss and analyse in writing their decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills.
Key knowledge
This knowledge includes
• the relationship between purpose, form, language and
  audience in a range of print, non-print and multimodal
  text types, with close attention to authors’ choices of
  specific structures and features; for example, style,
  images, design, point of view, tone and register;
• the ideas and/or arguments relevant to the chosen
  Context, including an understanding of the ideas
  and arguments presented in selected text/s;
• strategies for creating, reviewing and editing;
• metalanguage to discuss and analyse their own and
  others’ creative choices;
• the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of
  Standard Australian English.

Key skills
These skills include the ability to
• analyse the relationship between purpose, form and
  audience in a range of text types, with close attention to
  authors’ choices of structures and features;
• select and shape information, ideas and argument
  appropriate to the chosen form, audience, purpose and
  context;
• draw on ideas and/or arguments presented in selected
  text/s;
• use appropriate strategies to review and edit texts for
  fluency and coherence;
• use appropriate metalanguage to discuss and analyse
  their own and others’ authorial choices;
• use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax
  of Standard Australian English.

AREA OF STUDY 3

Using language to persuade
The focus of this area of study is on the analysis and
comparison of the use of language in texts that debate a topical
issue which has appeared in the Australian media since 1
September of the previous year. Students read, view and listen
to texts such as feature articles and opinion columns, cartoons,
editorials, letters to the editor, interviews on current affairs
programs, websites and CD-ROMs, speeches, excerpts from
online focus and discussion groups, and advertisements in
magazines and newspapers, and on websites and television.
They analyse and compare the ways in which verbal and non-
verbal (including visual) language of these texts is used to
persuade readers and viewers to share the point/s of view being
presented. Drawing on their study of the use of language to
persuade, students construct a piece of sustained and reasoned
writing in which they put forward their own point of view on
the selected issue in written or oral form.

Outcome 3
On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse
the use of language in texts that present a point of view on an
issue currently debated in the Australian media, and to
construct, orally or in writing, a sustained and reasoned point of view on the selected issue. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills outlined in area of study 3.

**Key knowledge**

This knowledge includes

- the structures, features and conventions of a range of persuasive texts from the Australian media – print, non-print and multimodal – constructed for different audiences and contexts;
- techniques for the critical analysis of ideas, arguments and evidence presented in persuasive texts;
- strategies and metalanguage for identifying, analysing and comparing the use of verbal and nonverbal (including visual) language designed to position readers in particular ways;
- strategies for constructing a sustained, coherent and logical argument;
- the conventions of small group and whole class discussion, including ways of developing constructive interactions and building on ideas of others;
- the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

**Key skills**

These skills include the ability to

- identify the structures, features and conventions of a range of persuasive texts from the Australian media – print, non-print and multimodal – constructed for different audiences and contexts;
- use strategies and appropriate metalanguage for identifying, analysing and comparing the use of verbal and non-verbal (including visual) language to position readers in particular ways;
- gather, organise, analyse and synthesise information and ideas into a sustained, coherent and logical argument;
- listen actively and respond appropriately to others’ views during discussion;
- acknowledge sources accurately and appropriately where relevant;
- use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.
Appendix 5: VCE/VCAL Assessment Comparison

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VCE – English Unit 3</th>
<th>VCAL – Literacy Skills: Senior Reading and Writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Source:</strong> VCAA, 2006 p. 27-28</td>
<td><strong>Source:</strong> VCAA 2008 p.15-16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>ASSESSMENT</strong></td>
<td><strong>Assessment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The award of satisfactory completion for a unit is based on a decision that the student has demonstrated achievement of the set of outcomes specified for the unit. This decision will be based on the teacher’s assessment of the student’s overall performance on assessment tasks designated for the unit. The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority publishes an assessment handbook that includes advice on the assessment tasks and performance descriptors for assessment. The key knowledge and skills listed for each outcome should be used as a guide to course design and the development of learning activities. The key knowledge and skills do not constitute a checklist and such an approach is not necessary or desirable for determining the achievement of outcomes. The elements of key knowledge and skills should not be assessed separately.</td>
<td>The assessment methods used should be appropriate for students, their learning styles and needs, the topic or field of study and the learning outcome. Where possible, learning outcomes should be grouped together for assessment – more than one learning outcome should be assessed in an assessment task/activity. For example, a teacher observation of a class discussion about a text read by students could be used to assess both a Reading learning outcome and a learning outcome in the Oral Communication unit. Students could also write a response to the text and cover one of the writing learning outcomes. Examples of assessment tasks/activities which relate to a specific learning outcome can be found in the learning outcome details. Examples of integrated assessment tasks/activities can be found at the end of this unit. These examples are of tasks/activities that integrate and assess more than one learning outcome, sometimes within the Reading and Writing unit, sometimes across strands. To be credited with this unit the student must demonstrate competence in all learning outcomes. All elements in a learning outcome must be met in the one task for students to show competence in that outcome.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assessment of levels of achievement</strong></td>
<td><strong>Contribution to final assessment</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The student’s level of achievement in Unit 3 will be determined by school-assessed coursework and an end-of-year examination.</td>
<td>School-assessed coursework for Unit 3 will contribute 25 per cent to the study score. The level of achievement for Units 3 and 4 is also assessed by an end-of-year examination, which will contribute 50 per cent to the study score.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Contribution to final assessment</strong></td>
<td><strong>School-assessed coursework</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-assessed coursework for Unit 3 will contribute 25 per cent to the study score. The level of achievement for Units 3 and 4 is also assessed by an end-of-year examination, which will contribute 50 per cent to the study score.</td>
<td>Teachers will provide to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority a score representing an assessment of the student’s level of achievement. The score must be based on the teacher’s rating of performance of each student on the tasks set out in the following table and in accordance with an assessment handbook published by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority. The assessment handbook also includes advice on the assessment tasks and performance descriptors for assessment. Assessment tasks must be a part of the regular teaching and learning program and must not unduly add to the workload associated with that program. They must be completed mainly in class and within a limited timeframe. Where optional assessment tasks are used, teachers must ensure that they are comparable in scope and demand. Teachers should select a variety of assessment tasks for their program to reflect the key knowledge and skills being assessed and to provide for different learning styles.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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### Outcomes

#### Outcome 1
Analyse, either orally or in writing, how a selected text constructs meaning, conveys ideas and values, and is open to a range of interpretations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks allocated</th>
<th>Assessment tasks</th>
<th>Conditions of assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td><strong>For all students:</strong> • a response to a selected text, either orally or in writing.**</td>
<td>The conditions related to assessment of the learning outcome may differ according to the particular learning environment, mode of delivery and field or topic of study. Students should have access to: • a range of assessment tasks / activities • a learning environment appropriate to the task • a computer with relevant software (for example, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word) • support and advice • communication support as required (for example, dictionary, personal word lists). Subject matter may be ‘everyday’ and may include some unfamiliar material.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Outcome 2
Draw on ideas and/or arguments suggested by a chosen Context to create written texts for a specified audience and purpose; and to discuss and analyse in writing their decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks allocated</th>
<th>Assessment tasks</th>
<th>Conditions of assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>• at least one sustained written text created for a specific audience and context, with a written explanation of decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context <strong>or</strong> • three to five shorter texts created for a specific audience/s and context/s with a written explanation of decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context</td>
<td>The conditions related to assessment of the learning outcome may differ according to the particular learning environment, mode of delivery and field or topic of study. Students should have access to: • a range of assessment tasks / activities • a learning environment appropriate to the task • a computer with relevant software (for example, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word) • support and advice • communication support as required (for example, dictionary, personal word lists). Subject matter may be ‘everyday’ and may include some unfamiliar material.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Outcome 3
Analyse the use of language in texts that present a point of view on an issue currently debated in the Australian media, and to construct, orally or in writing, a sustained and reasoned point of view on the selected issue.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marks allocated</th>
<th>Assessment tasks</th>
<th>Conditions of assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>• writing which analyses the use of language in three or more persuasive texts that debate a current issue in the Australian media <strong>and</strong> • a sustained and reasoned point of view on the selected issue in written or oral form.**</td>
<td>The conditions related to assessment of the learning outcome may differ according to the particular learning environment, mode of delivery and field or topic of study. Students should have access to: • a range of assessment tasks / activities • a learning environment appropriate to the task • a computer with relevant software (for example, Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word) • support and advice • communication support as required (for example, dictionary, personal word lists). Subject matter may be ‘everyday’ and may include some unfamiliar material.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*School-assessed coursework for Unit 3 contributes 25 per cent to the study score

Total marks = 100

**One task, but no more than one task, in Unit 3 must be in oral form.**

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| VCE assessment cannot be integrated with other Curriculum assessment. (VCAA 2007) | VCAL assessment can be integrated with other learning outcomes from within that VCAL strand or from other VCAL strands (VCAA 2007) |
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VALA – see Victorian Applied Learning Association


VCAA – see Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority


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