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APPLIED LEARNING EDUCATORS BREACHING BOUNDARIES STORMING BARRIERS

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Abstract:

This paper provides discussion of learning experienced by Applied Learning Educators in a workplace context where everyday teaching activities can involve undertaking unfamiliar tasks to the extent that the concept of ‘crossing boundaries’, or acting outside ‘comfort zones’ becomes ‘normalised’. This perspective arises from consideration of extensive interviews with Applied Learning Educators who work in the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a senior years’ pathway in Victoria. The pathway is available in settings of schools, Adult Community Education (ACE) and Technical and Further Education (TAFE) and designed to support the engagement of young people in education and their subsequent transition into further study or meaningful work. VCAL Educators use Applied Learning pedagogy in the development of curriculum content that promotes employability skills, connectedness to community and has grounding in student interests and needs. Subsequently student learning in VCAL occurs in and out of classrooms. Applied Learning Educators frequently navigate institutional boundaries in the process of negotiating and developing partnerships with industry and community organisations to enable learning to be undertaken in meaningful and relevant environments. In this paper Boundary Crossing is used as a concept for discussing the wide-ranging nature of VCAL educators’ everyday practice as they respond to the needs of the cohort and requirements of the curriculum. Collegial learning is considered using the notion of Communities of Practice.

Keywords: Applied Learning, VCAL Educators, Boundary Crossing, Communities of Practice.

Introduction

The Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) is a senior years’ pathway which meets the challenge for education described as being

..to create possibilities for participation and collaboration across a diversity of sites, both within and across institutions...

(Akkerman, Admiraal, & Simons, 2012[pre-press]; Daniels, Edwards, Engestrom, Gallagher, & Ludvigsen, 2010; Ludvigsen, Lund, Rasmussen, & Saljo, 2010 cited by Akkerman and Bakker 2011, p.132-133)

The VCAL was developed as a result of the Kirby Review (Kirby, 2000) to provide possibilities and opportunities for young people at risk of disengaging from education and not continuing into further education and training. Since the widespread implementation of VCAL in 2003 across schools, ACE (Adult Community Education) and TAFE (Technical and Further Education) the number of providers has grown to at least 440 (VCAA, 2012). The curriculum includes opportunity for young people to gain employment skills by using a range of modes including Vocational Education and Training (VET), Structured Workplace Learning (SWL), partnerships with community organisations, and meaningful project based activities that have a focus on producing employability skills.

Both students and educators in VCAL cross various boundaries. VCAL students move between physical settings to undertake components of their course (for example Vocational Education Training (VET) and Structured Workplace Learning (SWL)). VCAL educators frequently cross physical and social boundaries as they move into, and out of, various institutional settings. Engagement with a range of institutional settings is necessary to formulate and negotiate curriculum content with industry and community partners for the Work Related Skills (WRS) and Personal Development Skills (PDS) strands of VCAL. Akkerman and Bakker consider boundary crossing as “participat[ing] and collaborat[ing] across a diversity of sites, both within and across institutions” (2011, p.132-133). Subsequently there is a natural correlation between the professional activities of VCAL educators in their work place and the concept of boundary crossing.

For many educators the requirements of teaching in the VCAL not only demand movement across a range of unfamiliar physical (eg. institutional), social (eg. community) and workplace boundaries. VCAL educators are also frequently required to intellectually engage with unfamiliar knowledge spaces in order to apply skills (eg. project management) not necessarily included in teacher preparation courses. To develop and enact curriculum content educators need an ability to identify, establish and sustain partnerships with outside agencies¹. While managing these partnerships the educator may also be teaching a concentration of young people with diverse learning styles and challenging behaviours who are frequently disengaged from education. For many of the educators, particularly in responding to student needs, their teaching practice takes them out of personal and professional comfort zones as well as across institutional boundaries. Using boundary crossing as a framework provides an accessible way of discussing movement of VCAL educators between professional spaces as

[b]oundary crossing was introduced to denote how professionals at work may need to “enter onto territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some significant extent therefore unqualified” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p.134, citing Suchman, 1994, p.25)

This discussion draws on interviews with VCAL educators and provides an *introductory consideration* of boundary crossing as a framework for considering the wide ranging nature of VCAL educators’ work as they professionally respond to the needs of their students and the requirements of the curriculum. The resultant learning as the educators move between or through boundaries is considered using the notion of communities of practice.

There are commissioned reports that focus on the implementation of the VCAL program along with research focusing on the young people in the VCAL program, however there is, to date, little critical research which considers the professional learning experiences and needs of educators who work in alternative pathways and settings such as VCAL (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013; Schulz, 2012; Schulz, 2011; Plunkett & Dyson, 2010; Blake, 2009; Blake & Gallagher, 2009; Walsh, Beeson, Blake & Milne, 2005; Henry, Dalton, Wilde & Wilde, 2003).

¹ Outside of the school or organisation in which they teach.

Applied Learning in VCAL

Applied Learning in the context of VCAL not only denotes learning by ‘doing’. VCAL was developed using a firm foundation of Applied Learning as *pedagogy*. After drawing on educational theories (such as experiential learning, constructivist learning, distributed cognition, multiple intelligences and differing learning styles) the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) determined eight principles which provide the characteristics of Applied Learning in the context of senior years’ curriculum within Victoria:

1. Start where learners are at.
2. Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum
3. Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
4. Connect with communities and real life experiences.
5. Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
6. Integrate learning – the whole task and the whole person. In life we use a range of skills and knowledge. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks.
7. Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Everyone learns differently. Accept that different learning styles require different learning/teaching methods. But value experiential, practical and ‘hands on’ ways of learning.
8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context (VCAA, 2011, p.1).

For many educators, the requirement to teach using Applied Learning pedagogy, in particular to consider the 2nd, 4th and 6th principles means a major shift in professional thinking and practice. Educators using Applied Learning frequently find that their existing ‘comfort zones’ of practice, which suffice when teaching curriculum such as VCE, become unsettled and uncertain when developing and enacting curriculum content within VCAL. This confirms Akkerman and Bakker’s assertion that

[s]pecialization and globalization bring about an increase in multiplicity and diversity on the one hand, and interactions between and movement across sites on the other hand. Hence we can expect more boundaries to be encountered" (2011, p.2).

The VCAL curriculum is structured around four strands:

- Literacy and Numeracy Skills
- Industry Specific Skills
- Work Related Skills
- Personal Development Skills (VCAA, 2011a, p.2).

To encourage and support students in working ‘where they are at’² there are three qualification levels in each strand: foundation, intermediate and senior (VCAA, 2011a, p.1). The main difference between the qualification levels is the degree of teacher support and student autonomy required. It should be noted that frequently VCAL educators have a cohort of students in their classroom who are working at different qualification levels, have a concentration of different learning styles and display a concentration of challenging behaviours (Broadbent & Papadopoulos, 2013; Schulz, 2012; Schulz, 2011; Blake, 2009; Pritchard & Anderson, 2006; Harrison, 2006; Henry et al, 2003). Often the cohort will include students with special needs. The result is the VCAL educator must be thinking simultaneously on several levels to anticipate and respond to the individual needs in their classroom.

Another difference between teaching in VCAL and teaching in another Victorian senior years’ pathway such as the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), is the detail provided by the Victorian

² The first VCAA principle of Applied Learning

Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) (which oversees both programs) regarding curriculum content and assessment requirements³. This aspect will be expanded upon later in discussion.

Interviews with Applied Learning Educators

This paper draws on data from 27 semi-structured, face to face interviews with Applied Learning educators who worked in the settings of schools, ACE and TAFE. The qualitative approach of the research supports a focus *on held and gathered experiences of real people* and has an underlying connection to boundary crossing. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p.12) indicate the ‘province of qualitative research... the world of lived experience ... is where individual belief and action intersect with culture’. This is especially relevant to youth educators whose own beliefs and judgements must be set aside in order to engage with other points of view evident in youth and workplace cultures.

Each semi-structured interview involved the use of open questions developed with the intention of drawing out the stories of how participants came to teach in VCAL and their subsequent professional learning experiences. The result was 27 individual stories that crossed many topic boundaries as each participant responded to the questions in their own way. Conversations ranged far and wide “because there are stories inside stories and stories between stories” (Metzger, 1979, p.104). This reflected the variety of settings the VCAL educators worked in and the wide ranging nature of VCAL Educators’ everyday practice.

The methodological decision to include boundary crossing as a qualitative tool in exploring the professional experiences of the VCAL educators was underpinned by a belief that

[i]n their work, experts operate in and move between multiple parallel activity contexts. These multiple contexts demand and afford different, complementary but also conflicting cognitive tools, rules, and patterns of social interaction (Engeström, Engeström, and Kärkkäinen, 1995, p.319)

In the context of this discussion Engeström, Engeström, and Kärkkäinen’s statement describes the institutional boundaries the VCAL educators move between and the multiple demands of their classrooms. As previously stated, classroom demands can include (but are not limited to) teaching a cohort of young people working at differing qualification levels while attempting to address a concentration of challenging behaviours and learning needs. Many VCAL educators feel ill prepared for crossing these professional practice boundaries. (Blake, 2009; Harrison, 2006; Pritchard & Anderson, 2006; Henry, et al., 2003).

In addition to literature and research data this discussion draws on knowledge and experience gained as a member of a pre-service teaching team delivering a Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) (GDE(AL)). Applied Learning pedagogy is used to deliver the curriculum content of the course. Students who successfully complete the qualification are able to teach in the Middle and Senior years (which includes the VCAL program). They graduate with specific knowledge of Applied Learning as teaching pedagogy. Frequently GDE(AL) graduates become VCAL educators.

Breaching boundaries: teaching in VCAL

Many teachers undertake tasks and duties, as part of their teacher identity in addition to specific ‘teaching’ activities. The unique nature and structure of VCAL curriculum, however means that VCAL educators extend the boundary/ies of teacher-related activities further than many of their non-VCAL-teaching colleagues.

³ For examples of VCE and VCAL study designs, curriculum, assessment guidelines and descriptions of evidence see <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au>

Nick⁴ has taught in schools and, when interviewed, was teaching VCAL in a non school setting. He said:

... definitely there is no way you could say 'well my teaching role is when I am standing in front of my classes', it is just not how it is, even in schools it is not like that...

Later Nick explains he thinks that everything he does as a teacher, such as relationship building with parents and other staff are vital parts of the 'whole' of teaching and says:

...so I find it hard to [answer] 'what do we do that is not teaching?'

An interview note, made at the time, indicates I was quite struck by this way of thinking and started to think about the stories of teaching in VCAL in a different way.

As previously stated, two 'differences' in the VCAL program relate to curriculum content and assessment. While the VCAL curriculum structure (learning outcomes) has been determined by the VCAA, the content (what the learning will consist of in order to meet the VCAA learning outcomes) is developed by the VCAL educator, in consultation with the students (as promoted by the 2nd principle of Applied Learning). In regard to VCAL assessment, the VCAA provides guidelines as to what the student is to do, but the guidelines do not specify the task. For example, in Work Related Skills Unit 2, the first Learning Outcome is "Collect, analyse and evaluate information in a work environment" (VCAA, 2007, p.30). The VCAL educator is required to formulate meaningful, relevant activities and tasks that will enable the students to demonstrate and meet the learning outcome. Subsequently, the VCAL educator makes professional judgement as to what constitutes "valid, sufficient, authentic, current and consistent" evidence to prove that the learning outcomes have been met and compiles a record or collection of artefacts to substantiate the assessment decision (VCAA, 2010, p, 5).

These two 'differences' can be thought of as boundaries through which VCAL educators must 'push' for the program to succeed. In addition to these two boundaries there are a number of others. For the purposes of this paper however, discussion is confined to four boundaries that VCAL educators might be regarded as 'breaching', they are: cohort, content, assessment and skill sets.

The Cohort

The intention of the research interview questions was to draw out educators' professional learning experiences; consistently however, the conversation focus reverted to (or included mention of) the young people who were being taught. No educator seemed to regard their practice as something that could be discussed in isolation from consideration of their students.

There are a number of ways boundaries can be observed in regard to the VCAL cohort. Among them are the professional practice boundaries that VCAL educators must negotiate to form pedagogical relationships. There are also the rules or accepted ways of managing classroom behaviour that VCAL educators often need to **put aside** in order to have learning occur in their classrooms. Niles says:

I work with pretty tough kids and I seem to be able to build relationships with 95% of those students – really good positive strong relationships that has that balance of not being too teacherish....and I think that is important you can't take all the class room management [books and theories] in the world into THIS 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...

⁴ Pseudonyms have been used for all research participants.

The data provided reinforcement of literature which says VCAL educators, especially in ACE and TAFE feel ill-prepared for some behaviours they encounter in the cohort. Niles said:

... I believe coming out of our [teacher preparation course] and walking into classrooms – especially in the ACE sector that [it is] a little bit like sending soldiers into a war zone [after]giving them three weeks of intense training and expecting them to know how to fight...

He continued:

...they were probably the toughest students that I have come across...

Noah provided good evidence of why a negotiated curriculum works well with the VCAL cohort:

...[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! 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 – which you can - you gotta be able to do that...

... you obviously have your plan before that – but adjust - be flexible – modify – ... - the VCAL kids traditionally would be hanging from the rafters if you don't change it so and it is no good for anyone then.. you become a policeman instead of a teacher and they just don't enjoy what is going on..

Nick, Niles and Nigel detailed some characteristics of the VCAL cohort by saying:

....a lot of our students are now starting to move out of home – or getting kicked out of home...

... because there is such a range in our classes and that is probably the most difficult thing with VCAL and with our classes the range is huge..while some students are low academic status, some students aren't and they are really strong

...some of the students we teach are disengaged ...

Arthur, who had only been teaching a VCAL cohort for short time when interviewed, didn't waste words to describe the young people he was working with and what he considered the key in engaging them:

... 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”...

...In VCAL more than anywhere else rapport is important...

Arthur was teaching a VCE cohort elsewhere and was able to provide a comparison of the two cohorts he worked with:

.....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 their classrooms Nick, Niles, Nigel, Noah and Arthur are dealing with concentration of young people with challenging behaviours and a greater diversity in learning needs than in cohorts taught by

non-VCAL colleagues. Identifying and developing curriculum content to both meet the needs of the cohort and Quality Assurance requirements of the VCAA is difficult.

Content

Among the challenges faced by educators who taught VCAL was the process of adapting to negotiating curriculum content. Developing content collaboratively with students was quite different from other teaching they had done. Some like Sara, teaching VCAL for the first time, struggled to identify content, while simultaneously attempting to conceptualise what VCAL ‘looked like’ :

*...I had no content [for the VCAL units]...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 because I had never heard of WRS [Work Related Skills] (laughs) I didn't understand the curriculum at all...nobody knew anything [describes a lack of school support]...*

Sara responded to the challenge by drawing on her previous teaching work which involved connecting with communities and teaching disengaged young people. She was also fortunate in having project management skills. Much curriculum content in VCAL is based on meaningful, real, community based ‘projects’ undertaken by students.

For some educators like Noah the flexibility of VCAL was like ‘coming home’ to a familiar pedagogy:

... when you are 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 on in high schools whereas here I just felt that opportunity for creativity and things like that I want to teach what is real life and interesting...

Unfortunately not every VCAL educator coped well with the flexibility of VCAL. Nigel indicated:

...one area that I'm personally find difficult about the VCAL is that flexibility I'm probably more, I wouldn't say rigid, but I like a little more structure...

Nigel went on to say that his other tasks and responsibilities as a teacher impinged on his ability to be flexible:

...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...

Sue reflected the views of several educators when she indicated that having teaching experience was not necessarily adequate preparation for teaching in VCAL:

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

In their classrooms educators not only struggled with identifying content, they were also challenged by the flexible nature of VCAL assessment.

Assessment

Assessment in VCAL provides for flexibility so that students with a range of learning abilities are able to be assessed in accordance with their learning style. Additionally assessment is compatible and appropriate to the curriculum content negotiated by the VCAL educators and students. This is quite different to the assessment approach in other senior years' programs.

Noah highlighted his struggles:

...the assessment is different and that is probably something that takes a little bit to get used to...

The educators are not only required to be conversant with flexible assessment approaches. Another consideration is the need for accountability and compliance, to ensure that all providers of VCAL are seeking an appropriate level of evidence for each of the VCAL qualification levels. Quality Assurance (QA) sessions, overseen by the VCAA, are held regularly to ensure that assessment decisions are consistent, appropriate and fair. As Noah indicated:

I think you are even more vigilant with VCAL - because of that [the need for accountability]. Because you have got that flexibility and creativity, if you get audited you need to be red hot on – you need to be able to justify 'this is how I met this outcome' and 'this is exactly what I am doing'. So I think you are even more attuned to it as opposed to something that is set out for you and you just assume that it is going to meet the guidelines for everything – whereas if you are creating you need to be all over 'how' – you need to be sure that not only is it engaging and interesting but 'does it meet the requirements' at the same time because simply it is your responsibility...

Among the participants there was acceptance that the flexible assessment approach of VCAL met student needs. Niles said:

Sometimes they [students] don't like to do a lot of writing. Very minimalist. [So you] get them to show they are competent in other ways. You have to be creative in other ways, but you have got the flexibility to do that.

For a new-to-VCAL educator however, like Niles, the creativity allowed with flexible assessment can also be a negative experience:

...there was not support at any point, basically I was just told, these are your classes, you need to come and teach them. [They gave me] the times and the subjects and then it was for me to devise curriculum activities and assessment tools...

In VCAL classrooms the VCAL assessment approach is providing a range of challenges as VCAL educators work with a flexible assessment approach that meets student needs. To meet these challenges VCAL educators require a range of skill sets.

Skill sets

VCAL educators need skills that cater for the challenges of moving between unfamiliar professional spaces as part of their teaching practice.

Managing the students in their classrooms is a major issue for VCAL educators due to the characteristics of the cohort (concentration of challenging behaviours and diverse learning styles). In addition educators might be delivering different levels of a VCAL strand within the one class group. For Niles developing a solid base on which he could subsequently build relationships with his students was of first importance:

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) they haven't [previously] responded to those sort of techniques

Importantly, educators who work in VCAL need to be flexible and understanding of whom they are working with, rather than measuring success by 'normal' measures such as 90% or more attendance. Niles perspective is that:

...some of the students we teach are disengaged and to ask them to be here five days is a hard ask..

He also indicated that one teaching approach doesn't suit all students:

I guess what I am saying is that all personalities are so different so you can't use one brush for everyone and that is something that comes with experience that you can't just deliver it to them as 'teacher [centred] and expect them all to toe the line because they never will really. The more demanding and authoritative you get the more undone you become.

Niles commented that in VCAL *mentors* who could provide professional support and knowledge would not necessarily be helpful to new VCAL educators as 'one size does not fit all'. When asked if the process of understanding the environment in which he worked and formulating his practice around that would have been speeded up if he had a mentor he replied

...a mentor would have helped, but it depends what sort of mentor, as good as the mentors were that I had [when teaching non-VCAL programs] their mentoring was appropriate for [that] workplace but it wouldn't have been for where I am now...

Noah found crossing institutional boundaries a major part of his practice as a VCAL educator

... I have got to build relationships with local council, clubs, management, staff, students, and other organisations – that is it – essentially my whole role is building relationships and you have got to be able to do that and deal with [it]....

Sometimes though – it is just hard to articulate what skill sets a VCAL educator will benefit from – it might be 'what they are' rather than 'what they have'. Susan said

The Coordinator was looking for someone a little bit quirkyI'm not a disciplinariannot everyone can work in VCAL.....I try and build relationships with the kids...

One skill several participants highly desired was 'project management' so they could manage and coordinate activities in multiple boundary areas. Project work such as running a sausage sizzle in the school grounds as a fundraiser provides the basis for much of the VCAL curriculum.

Neil summarises the perspective and approach of a number of VCAL educators when he says

...what prepared me for this position is my life history really...I have only been a registered teacher for two years. Prior to that I have always seen myself as an

educator in different roles and have always done. I think that the route I took to get to where I am allows me to identify with the student base...

Neil's life story included being an early school leaver, undertaking an apprenticeship, working with young people in sports environments, travelling extensively around the world, casual work in industries such as hospitality and customer service and always having a mentoring role with young people regardless of where he worked. Many of the other participants also indicated, that to compensate for lack of structured support and to respond to the need for meaningful and relevant curriculum content, they drew on their life experiences. Some of the experiences they drew on included using public transport, budgeting, buying a house, buying a car, being an early school leaver, being a troublesome young person and being a parent of young people. The many boundaries they had negotiated previously in their lives provided the foundation for teaching among the unfamiliar boundaries of VCAL.

VCAL educators 'made' VCAL programs work by being *willing* to move outside their own individual comfort zones and draw on their past experiences

In 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 (Fenwick, 2006, p.22).

These words of Fenwick's neatly describe the space that VCAL educators find themselves in as they are forced to move away from familiar or 'habitual positionings' (boundaries) in responding to both the needs of the VCAL cohort and the VCAL program.

Communities of practice: storming barriers

It was evident that despite everyday teaching practice requiring boundary crossing across unfamiliar spaces some VCAL educators managed to develop and sustain a professional Applied Learning practice. It became apparent that to compensate for adequate professional support, a range of Communities of Practice assisted VCAL educators in both navigating boundaries and providing professional learning sustenance.

Akkerman and Bakker write that "[t]hough much learning does indeed take place within well-bound practices, learning can also occur when people interact with, move across or participate in different practices" (2011a, p.1). One of the ways that some VCAL educators are able to do this is by accessing Communities of Practice.

Wenger (1998, p.4) uses the concept of Communities of Practice to understand "learning as social participation" which includes the learning that occurs situated in a workplace setting. Benzie, Mavers, Somekh & Cisneros-Cohernour explain that Communities of Practice have been previously described

... as a metaphor for an ideal learning context in which new members of the community can engage in 'legitimate peripheral participation' and be inducted into the community' (2005, p. 181 citing Lave and Wenger 1991)

While the learning context of many of the VCAL educators may not be ideal, this perspective helps to describe educators who are new to teaching in VCAL. Additionally Lave has considered Communities of Practice as being underpinned by

... 'four premises concerning knowledge and learning in practice'..... as:

1. Knowledge always undergoes construction and transformation in use.

2. Learning is an integral aspect of activity in and with the world at all times. That learning occurs is not problematic.
3. What is learning is always complexly problematic.
4. Acquisition of knowledge is not a simple matter of taking in knowledge; rather things assumed to be natural categories, such as 'bodies of knowledge', 'learners,' and 'cultural transmission,' require reconceptualization as cultural, social products. (Benzie, Mavers, Somekh & Cisneros-Cohernour, 2005, p.180 citing Chaiklin & Lave, 1996, p.8)

Language used in discussion about Communities of Practice includes descriptors such as constructed, collegial, and transformative (Benzie & Somekh, 2012). These descriptors are also common to discussion relating to the pedagogical principles of Applied Learning in VCAL (VCAA 2011). Interestingly, in interviews, these terms were drawn on frequently by VCAL educators as they answered questions regarding how they developed and sustained their professional practice. Subsequently using the notion of Communities of Practice in considering the learning experienced by VCAL educators appears a natural process.

Communities of Practice were identified in the data in a number of forms⁵; among them was the pedagogical relationship between educators and their students along with the presence (or lack of) collegial learning support.

For participants such as Niles who worked in an organisation which predominantly delivered VCAL, accessing collegial support appeared easy:

...it is not so much a case of going to someone and saying 'should I do this?' – 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 ... 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...

I asked Niles if he had a reflective collaborative environment with his fellow educators. He replied:

... exactly – 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 [becomes] a mixing pot of understanding [as to]what is going on..

Ned's experience was similar to Niles

... having a good support mechanism here with my colleagues, we were a smaller group last year and were very tight because we all went through the same induction process and we went through the same issues and bounced ideas and supported each other which was very beneficial.

Sue said *we couldn't survive if we didn't have* a supportive, collegial networking environment. When I arrived to meet with Sue she was sitting down having a discussion with colleagues. I later found that she had given up a rare opportunity to debrief with colleagues to participate in a research interview

⁵ Note that this paper is not an exhaustive summary of findings.

... three nights a week we have to pack up as soon as the kids leave to get to the main school for meetings or PD so there is no opportunity for 'sigh...how was so and so today' or 'can you believe he did that'. That's why we were sitting down here, because it is a meeting free day, the only opportunity you get to go 'ooooohhhh'...

While Sue experienced support from other VCAL educators within her organisation she also found support at professional development opportunities outside of the organisation...

*...the support of other teachers who have been doing it **and** doing it because they want to...*

She indicated however, that not all professional development opportunities provided collegial support

...you go to some meetings and get together with groups of [VCAL educators] and they are like 'oh yeah but I do whatever'...

However Sue, Niles and Ned's experience was only part of the story. Sara described a project her VCAL class undertook in at a community playground. Sara had no help from her school regarding the logistics of coming and going from the playground. She found support from other sources. She said

...my husband is retired and he did lots of ferrying of materials and buying of materials and was just so supportive...my son who is an education student and [husband] would come along and patch up the bits that weren't right...

..I would like to network more strongly to link with other schools, but you get tangled up with the administration [at her school] who want to do that themselves. They don't actually do the teaching however. That is alright, I find ways around it...

A number of VCAL educators experienced support from their colleagues, but not necessarily from their organisation. Nora said:

...in all honesty, at the beginning of the year I felt like it was sink or swim, thrown in at the deep end, I hadn't done any professional development. I was given a curriculum guide and that was it. They said 'would you like to teach VCAL?'...

This was similar to Niles experience regarding assessment (described previously).

Communities of practice (including a lack of them) impacted on how prepared VCAL educators felt to teach the VCAL program and how able they were in sustaining their professional practice.

Conclusion

Working with Applied Learning pedagogy often requires educators to reluctantly press against the extremities of their familiar and safe current professional practice. For many educators, in addition to *pressing* into the unfamiliar, using Applied Learning pedagogy requires them to *move* into an unknown and unexplained space. One of the challenges they face is how to become comfortable with the *constant* unknown, unfamiliar and fluid boundaries of their workplace.

As Bauman (2001) emphasises, while boundaries shift, they do not disappear. They remerge in another form or place. Educators, who work with Applied Learning pedagogy frequently cross institutional boundaries, personal boundaries, negotiate practice barriers and push professional

boundaries with the result that a teaching space unique to VCAL educators has been created. Some VCAL educators become so used to working across unfamiliar spaces to the extent they wonder if they could return to teaching in more structured settings.

Akkerman and Bakker indicate that boundary crossing involves “negotiating and combining ingredients from different contexts to achieve hybrid situations” (2011a, p.2 citing Engestrom, Engestrom & Kärkkäinen (1995, p.319)). In the case of VCAL educators, working across sites and institutions while using Applied Learning pedagogy to create “possibilities for participation and collaboration” is compulsory and an inherent part of Applied Learning as pedagogy (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011, p.133). The challenge for Applied Learning Educators is how to manage and negotiate the boundary crossing. The challenge for organisations is to provide support for educators’ boundary crossing so resources, partnerships and organizational knowledge can be sustained.

This discussion has provided a snapshot of boundary crossing experienced by Applied Learning educators working in the context of VCAL. It sits in a broader discussion of the research data focusing on *boundaries, barriers and silence* in VCAL discourse and practice and how Communities of Practice can be harnessed to support and sustain boundary crossing in VCAL to ensure the success of the program.

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