

Capabilities of the emerging ‘advanced VET practitioner’

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Abstract

The notional ‘new VET practitioner’ is in tune with the needs of industry and the community, and seeks to customise programs to suit both enterprises and individuals. However, an exceptional version of this practitioner has emerged in recent times in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, who could be described as the ‘advanced VET practitioner’. While the new VET practitioner is demand-driven, the advanced VET practitioner has extraordinary capabilities for building client relationships, ensuring customer responsiveness and supporting flexible delivery. This superior strand of VET practitioner is raising the bar of professional practice and deserves public profiling.

Introduction

Together with my colleagues Clive Chappell, Andrea Bateman and Susan Roy, my research for the consortium research project, which resulted in the publication, *Quality is the key: Critical issues in teaching, learning and assessment in vocational education and training* (NCVER, 2006), identified fifteen features of a notional ‘new VET practitioner’.

However, since that research was undertaken in 2005, my ongoing research has identified the emergence of a more advanced version of the new VET practitioner. The research includes around thirty interviews I have undertaken for my weekly column in *Campus Review*, and a range of other assignments in the VET sector, including ten case studies from one training provider, Challenger TAFE.

As I am in the process of producing a book in mid-2008 on this topic of the advanced VET practitioner, some of my ideas are still being formed. Hence, this paper represents a snapshot of my emergent thinking on the topic, not a finished or fully rounded position. I would therefore appreciate any feedback on what is a work in progress.

Definitions

Stephenson (1992) provides a definition of capability which is used as a reference

point in this paper. His definition is useful for this paper as it is not too prescriptive, and fits with this discussion of the VET practitioner, a topic which requires a broad canvas upon which to work, given the range of different settings in which VET practice occurs. Stephenson defines individual capability as an all-round human quality, an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively. This capability is used not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts, but also in response to new and changing circumstances. Capability is also about potential, that is, what the individual can achieve.

For the purposes of this paper, and in addition to the term capability, a number of other descriptors are used in relation to the VET practitioner, including attributes, features, characteristics and abilities. This looseness in the use of terminology is deliberate, as the purposes of this paper are to cast a spotlight on the leading edge of VET practice and to acknowledge the richness of that leading edge. There is not space in this paper to discuss the distinctions between terms such as capability and attributes.

As this paper is about shining a light on VET practice, and VET practice occurs in so many different settings and ways, a broad definition of practice is needed. Wenger et al. (2002) provide a definition of practice from the field of communities of practice, based the idea of a set of common approaches and shared standards:

It denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things in a specific domain: a set of common approaches and shared standards that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. (p.38)

Practice is visible in the communal resources used by members of a practice:

These communal resources include a variety of knowledge types: cases and stories, theories, rules, frameworks, models, principles, tools, experts, articles, lessons learned, best practices and heuristics. They include both the tacit and explicit aspects of the community's knowledge. They range from concrete objects, such as a specialized tool or a manual, to less tangible displays of competence, such as an ability to interpret a slight change in the sound of a machine as indicating a specific problem. The practice includes the books, articles, knowledge bases, web sites, and other repositories that members share. (pp.38-39)

Practice is also a thinking style, an ethical stance, a mini-culture:

It also embodies a certain way of behaving, a perspective on problems and ideas, a thinking style, and even in many cases an ethical stance. In this sense, a practice is a sort of mini-culture that binds the community together. (p. 39)

This wide-ranging definition of practice suits the breadth of VET practice across the sector.

Literature review

Perhaps the starting point for the investigation of the characteristics of the 'new VET practitioner' – and possibly the first time that term was used – was in the work conducted at the University of Technology in 2003 around changing pedagogy. For

instance, Chappell and Johnston in *Changing work: changing roles for vocational education and training teachers and trainers* (2003 NCVER) discuss new VET practitioners such as those who work as consultants:

The competitive VET market has invoked new roles for these VET practitioners that are not only additional to the traditional 'teaching' role but are also substantially different in terms of focus, purpose and practice. Moreover, examples of these new roles can be found in all of the sites investigated in this research. The competitive market has also encouraged the emergence of new VET practitioners who operate as VET consultants and who earn their living by entering into commercial contracts with particular organisations and enterprises. (p. 5)

This definition was extended in subsequent research, particularly by Chappell working with Bateman, Roy and I in 2005 in compiling *Quality is the Key* (2006).

A number of VET reports in 2004-2005 underlined the need to develop new approaches to enhancing the capability of TAFE staff to meet future challenges. These reports included *Enhancing the Capability of VET professionals project: Final report* (Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald & McDonald, 2004), *Moving on...Report of the high level review of Training Packages* (Schofield & McDonald, 2004), *The vocational education and training workforce. New roles and ways of working. At a glance* (Guthrie, 2004) and *New ways of working in VET* (Mitchell, McKenna, Perry & Bald, 2005).

In *Quality is the Key* (Mitchell, Chappell, Bateman & Roy 2006) we noted that the environment for VET is changing, increasing the need for VET practitioners to extend existing skills and develop new skills in teaching, learning and assessment. Environmental change factors include government policy, skill shortages, new technology in industry, changes in the structure of work, the needs of youth and mature-aged workers, competition between providers, and the expectations of industry and the community. In this challenging environment, critical issues in terms of addressing what industry clients and individual learners want include meeting the increasing demand for the customisation and personalisation of training services; developing a deeper understanding of individuals' learning styles and preferences; and effectively providing services and support for different learner groups such as learners from equity groups and learners in the online learning environment. Other critical issues are understanding the many different ways learning can occur in workplaces and developing partnerships between external teachers and enterprise-based managers and trainers.

We also noted in *Quality is the Key* that critical issues in terms of the skills and resources needed by VET practitioners include the following: many VET practitioners need enhanced skills in implementing Training Packages, despite their widespread availability in the sector in some cases for seven or eight years; VET practitioners need skills to take advantage of the new digital technologies that become available each year; and VET practitioners need skills and resources to provide effective support for learning that occurs in the workplace. New skills and resources are needed in the design of learning programs and resources because of a heightened recognition that there are different types of learning, for example, formal and informal learning. New skills are needed to provide assessment services, for example to conduct assessment in the workplace, to provide a recognition process and to assess generic skills.

Further, we noted in *Quality is the Key* (2006) that as VET shifts from being supply-driven to demand-driven, a new practitioner is emerging, to satisfy the increasing expectations of industry clients and individual students. Traditionally, the VET practitioner was supply-driven. This practitioner believed that the best or only learning environment was the classroom – a site for learning far superior to the student’s workplace. In contrast, the new VET practitioner is demand-driven and only provides services that are wanted by enterprises and individuals. This progressive practitioner can customise programs to suit enterprises and personalise learning activities to suit the individual. The new VET practitioner lets go of the old certainties, like pre-set curriculum and didactic instruction, and develops attributes, attitudes, ideas and techniques that meet the needs of clients. The new practitioner looks outwards at market needs and seeks to meet those needs.

To address the idiosyncratic demands of each and every student and enterprise client, the new VET practitioner needs a raft of new skills: so many, in fact, that many practitioners need to be able to draw on the specialist skills and knowledge of colleagues and partners. New skills are required by the range of VET practitioners, from those employed by RTOs, either part or full time, to workplace trainers and assessors employed either by an enterprise or by an RTO. New skills are needed by all VET personnel, from managers to front-line trainers and support staff, in both public and private RTOs.

Some fifteen features and attributes of the new VET practitioner we identified in *Quality is the Key* (2006) are as follows:

- Views individual students as lifelong learners on career pathways
- Respects the business risks and pressures of enterprise clients
- Appreciates that enterprises need skills to achieve business outcomes
- Understands links between training, HR and workforce development
- Functions effectively within supply chains and skill ecosystems
- Exercises professional judgment in delivery and assessment
- Develops and sustains long-term relationships with clients
- Participates within a team to access colleagues’ specialist skills
- Taps into wider networks for information and resources
- Understands the value of accessing and applying industry research
- Contributes to the development of innovative products and services
- Commits to achieving and maintaining the quality of the profession
- Improves the tools and frameworks of professional practice
- Updates technical skills and industry-specific knowledge
- Copes with complexities and uncertainties about industry skill demands.

Notably, these features and attributes represent a new hybrid mix of educational and business thinking. This mix of frameworks is understandable, given that VET

practitioners are being encouraged to work more closely with industry and enterprises. Ideally, the new VET practitioner is a strong educator with an equally strong appreciation of business.

All of these attributes may not be evident in the one individual, but given the new environment for VET – demand-driven, client-focused, responsive to industry – all of the above attributes are ideally evident in a work team within the one training provider. Highly skilled VET practitioners and work teams are developing the necessary skills and knowledge required for them to operate effectively in an industry-aligned sector.

While the above profile of the new VET practitioner emerged from research undertaken in 2005, it is no longer an adequate summary of VET practitioners. More recent research suggests that there is an advanced version of the new VET practitioner. This advanced VET practitioner emerges particularly from practitioner research set out in two current publications of mine, *Ideas for Practitioners* (2006) and *Innovation and Entrepreneurship in VET* (2007). For me, the picture of the advanced practitioner became even clearer in interviews I conducted for various clients in 2007 and this is the picture I am seeking to convey in brief in this paper and at more length in a coming publication.

Methods

As mentioned above, the profile of the advanced VET practitioner began to emerge for me from two different sources: from research for a weekly column in *Campus Review* and from different assignments undertaken in the VET sector.

In the forthcoming book on the advanced practitioner, I will be using around thirty of the interviews conducted for *Campus Review* in the period 2007-2008. Each interview was based on the same approach: beforehand I researched the person to be interviewed, particularly by reading any documentation I could access on him or her; I then prepared, on average, ten-eleven interview questions which I forwarded to the person around five-seven days beforehand; I audio-taped the interview and transcribed it afterwards; and I then prepared the article, a draft of which I sent to the subject, to validate the accuracy of the draft. Most of the resulting articles were around 1,100 words each.

In the forthcoming book I will also be referring to research I have conducted for clients in the VET sector, where that research has resulted in a publication. One such publication I will be referring to in some detail is one I prepared for Challenger TAFE in Western Australia, *Building a New Practice: Implementing the Four Paradigm Model of Service Delivery*. The book contains ten case studies of around 2,000 words each, together with some meta analysis in both the executive summary at the start and the summary comments at the end. The methods used to develop these ten case studies of VET practitioners were as follows: a survey containing nine questions was issued to the subjects several months before the interview, so I could collect and read background information; an audio-taped interview was conducted with each subject, based on the survey questions; and a draft case study was prepared and then sent to each subject for confirmation of its accuracy.

Findings and discussion

My research during 2007- 2008 provides the following clarification about the context in which the VET practitioner now works. One feature of the new context is that VET organisations such as TAFE Institutes are changing, although not everything is changing. This image was presented, for instance, by Kevin Harris, director of TAFE NSW – North Sydney Institute whom I interviewed for *Campus Review* (9 Oct 2007). On the one hand Harris agrees with politicians that there is no future for an inward-looking TAFE institute that “sits within its four walls and puts up lists of courses and waits for the students to arrive,” but on the other hand he questions gloomy predictions about the future of large TAFE institutes. “There will always be some room for TAFE institutes to do just that, because people are conditioned to expect to go online and find a TAFE handbook and find a list of courses and make a decision and expect to see an enrolment time and date.”

Where Harris is in full agreement with politicians is in the commitment to serving customers. This customer focused approach is a definite change for TAFE Institutes which were historically supply-driven. To become more responsive and viable, his Institute is “absolutely focused on customers,” and as part of this focus, “we don’t do business plans anymore, we do marketing plans.”

That’s not a cliché. What we are attempting to do there is to find out exactly what our market wants and try to deliver that. That is the reason, for example, in our strategic approach, our key performance indicators are expressed in customer terms. Of course we measure net revenues and student hours and module completion rates, but they’re all secondary, they’re enablers. They allow us to get information about how we’re tracking towards the customer service indicators we’re focused on.

Harris notes that “what we are doing to remain viable is to remain valid. And we are only valid if we deliver on our mission which is to achieve economic growth and community well being. And we have to measure that achievement in customers’ terms.” Being customer focused – to a high degree – is now a crucial requirement of VET practitioners.

Another feature of the new context for training providers is that some practitioners are modelling the use of advanced skills. While the new VET practitioner is demand-driven, the advanced VET practitioner has extraordinary capabilities for building client relationships, ensuring customer responsiveness and supporting flexible delivery. This superior strand of the VET practitioner deserves public attention because its representatives are challenging previous concepts of the limits of capability of the VET practitioner.

One of the practitioners who fits this advanced category is Churchill Fellow recipient and current PhD candidate Terri Simpkin, the Hobart-based CEO of a micro training provider called Catalystdevelopment and a consultancy company Mischief Business Engineering. Another exceptional VET practitioner is Barbara McPherson, the managing director of a boutique training provider, River Murray Training, which came to public notice when awarded the national small training provider of the year in 2004.

Simpkin and McPherson share the characteristics of an advanced practitioner with Lesley Wemyss, director of Crestfern Pty Ltd, a small provider in Queensland and previously a finalist in the national training awards. Wemyss has managed Crestfern since 1992, but over the last five years has shifted her focus from the booming Gold Coast region to servicing remote mining companies and indigenous communities in far north Queensland.

Like Simpkin and McPherson, Wemyss offers her clients a suite of inter-related services, including training, assessment, research, consulting, resource development and project management. And like her two colleagues, Wemyss has a highly successful business despite operating in thin markets in regional areas. All three focus on opportunities in the market and skilfully avoid obstacles. All three effectively blend innovative approaches to education with business acumen.

A typical week for Wemyss is to take two-three flights from Townsville to remote mining sites in far north Queensland. In one week just before I interviewed her in late 2007, to deliver training programs within enterprises, she took six flights and drove 1,000km, but she has no complaints: “I love what I do and I mix with some of the most genuine people who work in these areas. People in industry are keen to train.”

Over the last two years Wemyss has worked closely with BHP Billiton to develop a health and safety management system for their staff in the Bowen Basin, a business unit involving nine coal mines, to manage the health and safety of their contractors. Additionally, she has developed a short course on auditing skills to be run in conjunction with this health and safety process, to be delivered to the workers who manage contractors. She is also working with the mining company Zinifex to enhance the skills of their onsite trainers and assessors. She began with this company over ten years ago, at a remote mine called Century Mine.

With an honours degree in biogeography and five other postgraduate qualifications, plus accreditation as an assessor and auditor, to work effectively in challenging locations Wemyss also draws on her personal experiences: “I have a country background, being born in Mudgee NSW, and that still influences many of my values and attitudes to life and work.”

Wemyss is committed to making a contribution to the wider VET sector. For instance, her collaboration with BHP Billiton resulted in being awarded funding by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework in 2006 for the development of an e-learning tool for use in industry. The project produced blended e-learning packages in a number of competencies including working at heights and working in confined spaces. The e-learning package enables workers who engage in these work practices to access a consistent process for recognition of their knowledge and skills.

In 2007 Wemyss was granted funding by Reframing the Future to facilitate professional development for trainers and assessors working in the complex industries in regional Queensland. Wemyss believes that “industry trainers and assessors from the complex industries are already drowning in training and assessment demands, and the pressures of skills shortages”.

This industry network project is giving the participants “a lifeline to rise above their current situation and have time to reflect on the need to think smarter, value the skills that are in existence in their workplace and commence an evolution into a higher level of training and assessing methodologies and innovative strategies in partnership with other practitioners in the same situation.”

Being industry focused and demand driven is not new for Weymss: “We only work with industry, we are totally demand driven, and have been for the last 10 years. We do not advertise at all, all our business is via referral.”

I do a lot of listening to the client, I deliver what they need. We value-add to the businesses we work with, we give 150%. We believe in what we do, but we never take for granted who puts the food in our mouths.

Characteristics of advanced VET practitioners, such as Lesley Wemyss, Terri Simpkin and Barbara McPherson, include the following:

- A breadth of experience in industry, refreshed by ongoing research and networking
- A deep knowledge of niche areas within their industry
- The ability to offer services both as a consultant and as a training provider
- The capacity to design, deliver and improve the use of flexible learning strategies
- A focus on linking training to an enterprise’s strategic planning and innovation
- The ability to design training that benefits both the individual and their employer
- A skill for positioning enterprise training so that it supports workforce development
- A track record of personalising training for each and every client
- A personal commitment to extensive and ongoing professional development
- An active involvement in professional associations
- A commitment to continuous improvement of their provider organisation
- An ability to develop a sustainable training business despite thin markets
- A positive focus on the bountiful opportunities in the VET market
- A determination to positively influence the VET sector.

This list of characteristics of the advanced VET practitioner can be compared with the list cited earlier as features of the new VET practitioner. The comparison reveals that advanced VET practitioners have a deeper knowledge of both education and industry, and more skills in both customising training and devising business solutions.

The capabilities of the advanced VET practitioner are further refined by a set of case studies I prepared in 2007, as described below. The case studies were prepared to show how some TAFE colleges are becoming more responsive to customers and clients. But to achieve this responsiveness in most colleges involves turning around large groups of staff who, in many cases, are used to being inward-looking, not outwardly focused.

Progressive TAFE leaders around Australia, like NSW’s Kevin Harris above, are implementing different strategies to help staff develop this client-focused mindset.

Across the continent in Western Australia, Liz Harris, managing director of Challenger TAFE, is actively implementing a unique model of service delivery originally conceived in late 2005. At that point in time the college had won the Australian Large Training Provider of the Year award, but more attention needed to be paid to levels of staff responsiveness.

So Harris, supported by college directors and staff, developed the four paradigm model to drive this change within Challenger TAFE. The model consists of four components: paradigm one is classroom-based delivery at a college campus, paradigm two is a blend of campus-based delivery and delivery in the workplace, paradigm three is delivery solely within an enterprise and paradigm four is the provision of workforce planning and development services.

I was commissioned to prepare a set of case studies on practitioners' implementation of the model, and the report was published in November 2007. The case studies cover a wide range of TAFE teaching areas, from defence and resources, to hospitality, children's services, fitness and sport, horticulture, construction and aquaculture.

One case study describes how Challenger's advanced skills lecturer Lyndy Vella noticed that, in the past, some IT graduates from the college had struggled initially to secure satisfactory employment. She formed the view that if she could bring together employers and current IT students, she might not only assist graduates' employment prospects, she might also be able to address industry's need for quality entrants to the workforce.

Lyndy Vella determined that the 'missing link' stopping some graduates from being offered jobs was not a lack of knowledge, but a lack of work experience. "There is a fear factor about getting the first job." So now she regularly places existing students with good companies, to gain this experience: "I go back to those companies where there are Challenger TAFE graduates." As part of the development of an ongoing community involving current and past students, Lyndy Vella also participates regularly in online chats with these groups.

Lyndy Vella's initiative has elements of all four paradigms but primarily the fourth paradigm, as it involves immersing students, employers and industry in an industry skills ecosystem. The initiative also involves paradigm one, with classroom training for initial skills training, and paradigm three, with learning arranged in the workplace for practising new skills.

The model illuminates the existence of an advanced category of the VET practitioner within Challenger TAFE. *Quality is the Key* (Mitchell et al. 2006) shows that a new VET practitioner has emerged in VET; a practitioner characterised by an understanding of both education and industry. The Challenger case studies suggest that an even higher category of VET practitioner, called an advanced practitioner, is evident within Challenger. The case studies show that advanced practitioners are entirely capable of operating effectively in more than one of the four paradigms.

A surprising finding from the Challenger case study research is that advanced practitioners are not only able to bring the four paradigm model to life and to enrich

it, they are also able to switch between paradigms as the need arises. This versatility is exceptional and is based on a deep knowledge of the students and the industry and the ability to design and implement flexible approaches to service delivery. This professional versatility is a tangible characteristic of the advanced practitioner.

A related finding is that the boundaries between the paradigms are fluid not fixed, porous not water-tight. Advanced practitioners find it easy to jump in and out of different paradigms. For instance, in many of the case studies, staff talk about providing on-campus classroom instruction (paradigm one) where it was appropriate, quickly moving to a mix of classroom and workplace training (paradigm two) where it was appropriate and then, for part of course, embedding all the training within an enterprise (paradigm three). The same practitioners find they are more and more engaging in professional dialogue with these same clients about industry-wide workforce planning (paradigm four).

Conclusions

This paper argues that it is worthwhile to separate out an advanced version of the new VET practitioner, and the main benefit is the light it casts on the leading edge of practice in the sector. This highlighting of leading practice enables us not to become hamstrung by discussions about the difference between capabilities and characteristics, or whether the terms advanced or superior are appropriate. And the paper does not steer into the political debate about whether a Certificate Level IV in Training and Assessment is sufficient training to produce advanced VET practitioners. Fundamentally, the paper encourages the positive, ongoing examination of the outstanding practices in the sector.

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