What makes a great teacher?

Attributes of excellence in VET

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What makes a great teacher? Attributes of excellence in VET.

OVERVIEW

This research was carried out against a background of ongoing change and greater complexity in the nature of vocational education and training. VET delivery and assessment is undertaken in a range of institutions and workplace contexts. It has involved the implementation of Training Packages and processes for the recognition of prior learning; and increasingly, it utilises new technologies and delivery modes. At the same time, practitioners (especially those employed in TAFE institutes) have had to respond to the pressures created by competitive tendering, growth through efficiencies, user choice and marketisation generally.

Paradoxically, observers have noted significant challenges to the professional standing of VET teachers. These challenges have been linked to several factors including the growth of a casualised workforce, the increase in workplace learning and the variations in qualifications required in different settings.

This study is based on the assumption that professional educators within institutions will continue to play a critical role in the provision of VET. The researchers sought to uncover the nature of excellence in VET teaching within an institutional setting. In-depth interviews were undertaken with 18 ‘expert’ teachers in a large rural TAFE institute in NSW. While the findings cannot be generalised across the whole VET sector, it can be argued that the themes which emerged have significant implications for recruitment of teaching staff, for initial teacher training and for ongoing professional development.

The study demonstrates that excellence in VET teaching extends far beyond competence in a set of practical skills. Rather it shows professional TAFE teachers drawing on a rich and complex knowledge base. The findings have been grouped into five major clusters of attributes shared by the expert practitioners who participated in the project.

The first of these, learner focus, emerges as a recurrent theme. There is a strong emphasis on responding to students as individuals. Respect for diverse backgrounds and needs is accompanied by a capacity to tailor the content and delivery of learning material so that all learners benefit from the experience. Expert teachers are able to incorporate their knowledge about learning styles and stages into their practice. They use professional judgment in order to adapt a syllabus to learner needs while still meeting the required learning outcomes.

In recognising that learning is a social activity, these teachers invest considerable energy in establishing and maintaining a positive learning environment. This
involves making productive use of group dynamics, of informal and workplace learning and of the learning that occurs when students interact among themselves.

The second cluster relates to technical knowledge and currency. Knowing one's subject area really well is linked to confidence and credibility in the teaching role. Many participants refer to the way in which their vocational knowledge has been enhanced over the years by further study, reflection and experimenting with new delivery strategies.

Maintaining currency is an ongoing commitment for excellent teachers. They employ various strategies that include undertaking periodic returns to their industry or the workplace, maintaining professional networks, subscribing to journals and industry updates and attending workshops or conferences. Significantly, most interviewees appear to take responsibility for initiating appropriate professional development opportunities themselves.

The third cluster of attributes involves expertise in teaching and learning methodologies. VET teaching is not usually a person's first career. While many part-time teachers identify primarily as workers who incidentally do some teaching or training, this group of teachers has made the shift to viewing themselves as professional educators. Expertise in teaching and learning goes to the very heart of what it means to be a professional VET teacher. In extensive discussion about the activity of 'teaching', it is evident that these teachers rely on a range of learning theories that provide a framework for their work.

The study showed that excellent teachers have the capacity to respond effectively to differences in learner needs, curriculum or situation. They are able to draw selectively from an extensive repertoire of resources and strategies in order to motivate learners and to encourage active learning. They give a high priority to organising and structuring the learning process so that theory is integrated with workplace practice and activities are sequenced in meaningful, holistic ways. What may appear simple to a casual observer is a complex process that incorporates planning, implementation and evaluation.

Assessment and feedback are also viewed as integral to the learning process. Expert teachers describe ways in which they keep students informed and involved through open and transparent assessment strategies.

The fourth theme concerns personal attributes, beliefs and values. Individual temperament, interests and values often lead people in their career choices and, for the teachers involved in this research, the common link is the passion they share for learning and for helping others to learn and reach their potential. Beliefs in the transformative nature of education and about the privilege of 'touching people's lives' are common among this group.
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Other common threads are high level communication skills and a commitment to one's own professional renewal. The capacity to communicate effectively and relate well with others is identified as an essential attribute. So too is a commitment to continual improvement of practice, whether it be through structured activities, informal learning, reflection on experience or learning from the learners themselves.

On the less positive side, many participants clearly feel that their teaching role is undervalued. Typical comments refer to being asked to do more with less, to lack of acknowledgment or feedback from managers, to the need for outcomes measurement to extend beyond budgets and delivery hours and to the importance of celebrating success, especially at the local level.

Finally, a fifth cluster relates to the major influences on teacher development in the journey from novice to expert. Questions relating to this issue triggered the most detailed responses from participants. The main influences identified were formal teacher training, observation of other teachers, mentoring by an experienced colleague, reflection on practice, and professional development activities.

Many teachers are ambivalent about the value of their initial teacher education. Certainly the experience exposed them to models of both good and poor teaching practice. However the heavy emphasis initially on theoretical concepts appears to have been counter-productive for some. There is strong support for the notion of combining formal study and teaching so that beginning teachers are able to contextualise theories of learning and integrate them into their practice.

Observation of other teachers is repeatedly identified as beneficial in developing teaching expertise. While acquisition of basic instructional skills is seen as useful, it is significantly enhanced by the opportunity to reflect on one's developing practice with the support of an enthusiastic and committed mentor. Further, when this process is linked to acquiring appropriate theoretical frameworks, then the benefit is even greater.

Later in their careers, teachers continue to draw professional support from networking with others, comparing approaches, exchanging resources and workshopping challenging issues. Reflecting on practice is common even among highly experienced teachers who often continue to adopt a critical, questioning attitude to their work, in a process very similar to that of the action learning cycle.

It is difficult to over-emphasise the significance attached to professional development. All participants expressed strong views about its value and the need for even greater commitment of resources in these times of changing technologies and delivery modes. Apart from the obvious functions of updating technical skills and knowledge, professional development is seen to provide other, less tangible, benefits. These include:
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- recharging the batteries of motivation and enthusiasm
- providing opportunities for networking, and
- reducing feelings of isolation.

Participants in this study exhibit a marked preference for self-determined professional development activities, claiming that they are in the best position to judge their emerging needs and challenges. They are sometimes critical of the tendency for mandatory programs (such as OH&S and Child Protection) to overshadow programs targeted to their professional needs.
RECOMMENDATIONS

Recruitment and Selection of Full-time Teachers

The research identified a number of enabling values and attributes that are associated with excellence in VET teaching:

- an ability to communicate effectively and relate well with others
- a passion for facilitating learning
- a commitment to reflection and improving on practice
- a commitment to their own learning and professional development
- a commitment to maintaining professional currency

It is recommended that recruitment and selection strategies for teachers include evaluation of those personal attributes and values that are associated with success in teaching.

New Teacher Training

In order to develop the capability and provide ongoing professional development for new full-time teachers, TAFE should provide teacher training programs which incorporate optional pathways appropriate to the needs, preferred learning styles and experience of new teachers.

Teacher training should incorporate three phases. The focus of the initial phase should be on the acquisition and development of basic skills in delivery, and on supporting new teachers as they experiment with a range of practical teaching and assessment strategies. The second phase should involve the development of theoretical concepts on which sound teaching practices are based; with the final phase being a formal process of reflecting on practice.

This third phase would capture and build on the numerous learning experiences encountered in teaching practice, support new teachers in developing their capacity to address the diverse needs of learners, and incorporate the application of relevant learning theory to their own practice. The professional practice component should constitute a unit of study in the Graduate Diploma in VET or equivalent teaching qualification.
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2 In relation to full-time teacher training it is recommended that TAFE:

a provide a range of approaches to initial teacher training (e.g. workshops, short courses available both face to face and flexibly, mentorship etc) to cater for differences in knowledge and experience, learning styles and preferences, and the nature of the subject area;

b require new teachers to enrol in professional level VET teaching studies only when a teacher has a substantial base of practical experience on which to build and apply theoretical concepts;

c require a new full-time teacher to undertake a professional practice year in which he/she maintains a learning journal. The debriefing of the journal and reflection on practice is to be supported by an appropriately qualified and experienced mentor/coach.

Professional Development

While the value of participating in generic professional development programs and networking with colleagues was acknowledged by the research participants, far greater import was given to self-generated activities which were often driven by a professional goal or were specific to the needs of the teacher and task at hand.

This research identified that the provision of more meaningful and relevant professional development opportunities needs to be supported by a demonstration of organisational confidence in the ability of staff to identify and act on self-initiated professional development activities.

3 In relation to professional development it is recommended that:

a TAFE expand its commitment to professional development activities (such as the Professional Development Scheme) which support self-direction and identification of strategies that benefit both the teacher (or teaching team) and the organisation;

b organisational sponsored professional development should be criteria specific, yet not so specific as to inhibit or restrict the enthusiasm of participants to engage in a productive learning experience that could have direct or indirect impact on their teaching capability;

c professional development opportunities be aligned with an individual’s work related maturity. Strategies should be implemented whereby new teachers are encouraged to share their current workplace knowledge and experience with more mature workers, who in turn would be encouraged to share their teaching expertise and organisational knowledge.
Maintaining Professional Currency

Professional currency was identified by our expert teachers as providing both credibility and teacher confidence. Existing staff who have not maintained their professional currency should be supported in identifying options and implementing activities appropriate to their professional background and identified need.

4 In relation to maintaining professional currency it is recommended that:

a a personalised professional currency strategy be developed which emphasises the benefits and ways of maintaining currency, and individual support/mentoring be offered to teachers participating in appropriate programs;

b new full-time teachers be encouraged to develop a long-term plan identifying how they will maintain their professional currency;

c resourcing for technical currency programs be borne jointly by the organisation and the individual. The accumulation of professional development release hours together with the use of non-teaching and non-attendance weeks should be encouraged for these activities.

Teaching and Learning in the Future

When asked to predict the nature of VET teaching in the future (over the next five to ten years), participants identified a range of developments. Some of these included: a sharp rise in e-learning and other flexible modes; more work based learning; less face to face teaching but more learning support; more partnerships (with schools, universities and industry); less training for traditional jobs as these disappear; more economic rationalism; and acceptance of lifelong learning. Most of these trends have been evident for some time.

It was interesting however to note that the teachers also took the opportunity to focus on the social dimension of learning; of the relationship between learner and teacher and between learner and learner, irrespective of the medium of delivery.

5 In relation to teaching and learning in the future it is recommended that:

a the design and delivery of generic professional development programs reflect both changing modes of educational delivery and the centrality of learning as a social activity;
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b more research be conducted to identify how the skills and knowledge to orchestrate a positive learning experience can be effectively translated into the online environment.

Acknowledging Teaching Excellence

Many participants expressed the view that the work of VET teachers is under-valued, not necessarily in financial terms, but in regard to the importance of their role. Little recognition is afforded to their ability to draw on an extensive repertoire of strategies and resources to support teaching and learning, or their expertise in curriculum planning, delivery and assessment.

It is recommended that TAFE:

a maintain a solid core of acknowledged ‘expert’ teachers who can sustain and promote teaching excellence, and foster the TAFE quality edge in a time of increasing casualisation of the workforce;

b formally acknowledge the capability and value of expert teachers by providing them with an appropriate title and conditions;

c utilise the capability of ‘expert’ teachers in developing the skills, expertise and confidence of new teachers.
1.0 Background to the study

Over the last decade the Australian VET system has been fundamentally transformed in response to government policy initiatives. These changes have impacted significantly on the work of VET practitioners as they address the challenges associated with competency based training and assessment, flexible learning and the shift from teaching to facilitation, new technologies, workplace based learning and assessment, increased casualisation and the competitive training market.

Central to the new training agenda is a focus on skill outcomes, as manifested in competency based training/assessment and the introduction of Training Packages. At the same time, it has been recognised that Australia needs highly skilled workers who possess flexibility, problem solving ability, and the capacity to utilise changing technologies and knowledge— who, in short, are lifelong learners. This applies equally to VET teachers who need to become lifelong learners themselves in order to cope with change and to assist others learn how to learn. It has been argued (Bathmaker, 1999; Cornford, 1999) that the current emphasis on development of practical skills neglects research showing that effective learning depends equally on attending to how people learn, to how they become experts and to how they transfer their learning to different contexts. In other words, practical skills need to be informed by theoretical understandings.

There is little doubt that the work of teachers and trainers has become more complex and demanding as they respond to the many changes associated with training reform. Researchers such as Seddon and Brown (1997), Kell (1997) and Chappell, 2000, have documented some of these changes in the nature of VET work. Yet, paradoxically, the professional standing and identity of VET practitioners is under challenge from several related developments. It has become very difficult to describe the VET practitioner in an inclusive way. Some of the factors contributing to this crisis of identity include:

- the ‘de-institutionalisation’ of the sector as the workplace becomes the privileged site for learning
- the variety of VET practice carried out across a range of contexts (TAFE, schools, private providers, workplaces)
- the marked differences in status and employment conditions of VET practitioners (especially between full time and sessional workers)
- the use of new technologies to deliver pre-packaged training programs, producing ‘teachers’ who often support and manage learning much more than they teach
- the variations in type and level of qualifications required in different settings.

Entry level preparation varies widely, ranging from the professional level undergraduate and postgraduate programs offered by the higher education sector through to very short ‘train the trainer’ type courses run by VET providers. Early in 1999 the Certificate IV Training Package, Assessment and Workplace
Training was introduced, and there are indications that this package might become the basic teaching qualification for VET, and indeed the qualification of choice. The relatively narrow specification of competence in the package gives rise to some concern among those who believe that practical competence should be informed by theoretical knowledge. Moreover, anecdotal evidence suggests that there is considerable variation in the quality of Certificate IV provision and consequently in the calibre of accredited trainers/assessors.

The picture that emerges is one of extreme diversity, whether of qualifications, experience, work site or of employment conditions. In this context, it is important to begin identifying the characteristics associated with 'expertise' (rather than mere 'competence') among VET practitioners. Studies have already been undertaken (eg Chappell and Melville, 1995) to develop profiles of (TAFE) teacher knowledge and skills. However in the wake of extensive changes to the training system and the emergence of a diverse VET sector, of which TAFE is now only one part, the time is opportune to investigate the capabilities required of the 'new' VET professional.

This study aims to extend current understanding about effective VET practitioners. By identifying ways in which teachers develop expertise and linking this to the literature on learning, the findings will assist in the design both of initial and continuing programs for VET practitioners. Specifically, the findings could contribute to the review of short training programs, as well as to higher education programs in VET.

In regard to continuing professional development, Smith (1998) has noted that staff development opportunities within VET are often inadequate to enable practitioners (especially the growing number of part-time trainers) to keep pace with the rapid changes in their occupation. Where resources are constrained, there is a pressing need to identify the most effective models of staff training and development.
2.0 The purpose of the study

The research involves an investigation into the knowledge and skills that expert TAFE teachers draw upon in order to do their work effectively. Good teaching can look easy because practitioners have effectively integrated theory, practice and teaching/learning process into a holistic experience for their learners. The research aims to make explicit the tacit knowledge and skills of these experts and uncover the processes by which their capabilities were acquired. Teachers’ explanations of their journey from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’ will be documented, along with their suggestions for effective initial training and ongoing professional development.

This pilot study will focus on the North Coast Institute of TAFE in NSW, but could readily be replicated on a broader scale, including other states and territories and other VET providers.

2.1 Specific objectives

- Develop a picture of the attributes characterising a group of ‘expert’ TAFE teachers
- Identify factors contributing to the development of their expertise
- Relate results to the literature on adult and vocational learning
- Make suggestions for the development of initial training for TAFE teachers, continuing development programs and professional renewal.

2.2 Research questions

This study asks:

- What are the attributes of ‘expert’ VET teachers in the current environment?
- What constitutes excellence? How is it developed? How can TAFE support excellence?
- What does current literature contribute to our understanding of the new VET professional?

The convergent interviewing methodology adopted required the use of broad, open-ended questions in the early stages of the process. An example might be, ‘How would you describe an excellent TAFE teacher in the current environment?’ Later interviews became more focused as researchers developed an interpretation of the data (see section on methodology). However some of the issues explored with participants during the course of the study were:

- Their current qualifications and experience (both vocational and teaching);
- Important influences on their development as a teacher/trainer (eg ‘How did you learn to be an expert teacher?’);
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- Their ideas about the transition from novice to expert (their own and that of new, beginning TAFE teachers);
- Impact of new developments (eg Training Packages) on their practice;
- The role of theoretical concepts and underpinning knowledge in their practice;
- Their current professional development needs and to what extent these are being met.

3.0 Methodology

This project utilised a collaborative research methodology, drawing on the skills and knowledge bases of two TAFE practitioner/researchers. One has been more heavily involved in practice; the other in research.

In a recent paper, Volet (1999) discusses the issue of the gap between research and practice in the field of post-compulsory education and training. As a result, VET policy and practice is less likely to be informed by research findings than it is by factors such as past practice, perceptions of industry needs and local constraints. She defines research and practice in these terms:

Research refers to education and psychology research on the nature of ... knowledge, skills and expertise, and on the characteristics of learning environments and instructional processes which foster their development. Practice refers to the activities of teachers, instructors and trainers aimed at facilitating learning and the development of professional or vocational competence in ... institutions, as well as in the workplace (p. 1).

Volet argues for the benefits of joint construction of knowledge between researchers and practitioners working in partnership. This setting up of a two-way process in place of the usual research-to-practice directional model will help to bridge the gap and ensure that each perspective values the contributions of the other.

Drawing on Volet's framework, which outlines a continuum of research-practice possibilities, this project employs the partnership option where both researcher and practitioner are regarded as joint experts. The research has thus the dual aims of enhancing conceptual understanding and of improving practice. Academic and experiential knowledge are equally valued as complementary.

3.1 Literature review

The literature review, in the form of an annotated bibliography, aims to identify some of the current issues and the changing conceptions of the nature of VET teachers' work over the past decade. It utilises a wide variety of sources including
academic and professional literature, government reports and conference proceedings. The review helped to inform development of potential probing questions for the interviews. Literature associated with learning theory has also been reviewed.

3.2 Interviews with TAFE teachers

In-depth interviews were carried out with 'expert' TAFE teachers currently employed by the North Coast Institute of TAFE in NSW. 'Expert' teachers were loosely defined in this study. They were recommended, usually by a supervisor, as an 'excellent' teacher and/or as 'someone who has the skills and knowledge to be able to assist beginning teachers in their practice'.

The technique of convergent interviewing (Dick, 1998) was used to collect qualitative information about the teachers' perceptions of the knowledge and skills needed to do their work effectively. Convergent interviewing consists of a series of long interviews in which, apart from a few broad focus questions, the content is initially unstructured. While probe questions may be asked in the latter part of the first interviews, they are always asked in later interviews. Typically the number increases from interview to interview. Working in tandem, each interviewer conducts an interview with a different member of the sample. Each then individually records her interpretation and the notes are compared with those of the other interviewer.

Later interviews become more focused as the researchers develop an interpretation of the data. Convergence from interview to interview is achieved by discarding low priority information mentioned only once. Information mentioned more than once becomes the focus of following interviews. If two mentions are in agreement, probe questions are devised to test the agreement. If in disagreement, probe questions seek an explanation. In this way, researcher bias is reduced and a degree of rigour achieved.

At some point in the process it is likely that no new information is being obtained and interviewing will be suspended. By this stage of 'saturation', the researchers will have identified a number of major themes.

This qualitative approach to data collection is also based on some of the assumptions of Grounded Theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). This approach acknowledges that understanding is grounded in the population under study and the researcher does not impose any theoretical assumptions prior to data collection. Analysis of the data is carried out continuously in order to identify themes and further directions for the study.

3.3 The sample
Participants in the research interviews were all currently practising TAFE teachers from the North Coast Institute of TAFE. The table below identifies relevant information relating to the current status of the teachers interviewed. It is noted that the years in TAFE incorporates both part-time and full-time years of teaching, as in several instances the participants were teaching part-time before they gained a full-time teaching position.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Teaching Qualification</th>
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<th>Gender</th>
<th>Full-time or Part-time</th>
<th>Discipline Area</th>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Dip Teach</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>Child Studies</td>
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3.4 Interim discussion paper and further data collection.

This discussion paper was developed from the preliminary findings and will be disseminated among the teachers interviewed, and the reference group. The procedure was designed as a check on the validity of the findings, and to gather further, more focussed input from the interviewees.

It is anticipated that the second round of data collection and analysis will be carried out via email during June and July, 2001.

3.5 Focus groups

It was planned to conduct two focus groups, one in the North Coast Institute and one in a metropolitan institute. This option was abandoned in favour of taking the findings back to the original participants so that particular issues could be explored in greater depth.

3.6 Reference group
A project reference group was set up to provide advice on the design of the study and on dissemination and implementation of the findings. Membership of the reference group includes:

- Director Human Resources, NCIT
- Faculty Manager, NCIT
- Teacher/union rep, NCIT
- Director, Postgraduate Studies, SCU
- Manager, Learning and Development NCIT
- Lecturer, School of Social and Workplace Development, SCU
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4.0 Literature review: annotated bibliography

The following were found to be useful sources of information on teaching roles and attributes, on current developments and their impact on the work of VET teachers and/or the nature of adult and vocational learning.


Bathmaker argues that any education of post-compulsory teachers should include development of theoretical knowledge as well as practical skills. Post-compulsory teacher training in England had been under review and standards were launched in 1999 as a precursor to a mandatory qualification for teachers in further education in England and Wales.

In a context where further education teachers are expected to widen participation and promote lifelong learning, Bathmaker argues that new arrangements for initial teacher training and ongoing professional development should extend beyond 'competence' in the practical skills involved in teaching and learning. They should also aim to develop critical knowledge and understanding of the changing context in which staff work. To achieve this, she advocates a strengthened partnership between further and higher education providers to develop more 'robust and coherent' approaches to professional capability. Capability, in these terms, would involve practice which is linked to reflection; engagement with theory and working collaboratively with others.


The focus of this book is on the improvement of teaching practice. Biggs provides a theory of how learning occurs, the main features of which are:

- meaning is created (constructed) by the learner, in particular by the nature of the learning activities that the learner uses. In a real sense, what the learner does is more important than what the teacher does.
- approaches to learning can be 'surface' (low cognitive level, focusing on isolated details) or 'deep' (focusing on main ideas, principles, applications).
- teaching methods may foster either deep or surface learning
- 'constructive alignment' is a design for teaching that most favours deep engagement of learners. Simply expressed, it involves matching curriculum objectives, learning activities and assessment tasks.

Good teaching, that is practice which supports effective learning, is characterised by:
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- establishing an appropriate motivational climate (discouraging surface approaches, demonstrating value of engaging with learning)
- constructing a base of interconnected knowledge (building on the known, making use of students' existing knowledge, emphasising interconnections between topics and confronting misconceptions)
- encouraging learner action, interaction and self-direction.

Although this text is aimed primarily at teachers in university settings, the principles and suggestions are equally applicable to the VET context.

Brown, M, Roos, I and Smith, E, 2000, The role of universities in educating VET educators, paper presented at the inaugural meeting of the Australian VET Teacher Education Colloquium, April, Canberra.

This paper explores what the authors see as the distinctive contribution made by universities to VET teacher education and development. They distinguish between three different types of provision:

- Competency based courses such as the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training.
- Degree and graduate courses providing teacher/trainer education for the VET sector.
- Work based learning or staff development where organisations provide programs for their own staff.

It is argued that a university education provides VET practitioners with valuable skills of criticism, analysis and synthesis relating to, for example, adult learning principles, the learning context, and forces affecting the world of work and education policy.

Chappell, C and Melville B, 1995, A High quality teaching workforce for TAFE NSW: professional competence and the initial and continuing education of NSW TAFE teachers, report No 1 Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training (RCVET), University of Technology, Sydney.

The aim of this project was to develop a professional competence profile for TAFE teachers working in NSW. The project team conceptualised TAFE teaching as a professional activity extending beyond technical performance to include attributes such as teachers' knowledge, ethical and contingent decision making and ongoing professional development.

The research also emphasised the complexity of TAFE teaching work, which involved, among other factors:
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- Meeting needs of learners, industry and communities.
- Delivering high quality programs in flexible ways.
- Maintaining technical skills and knowledge in a time of great change.
- Incorporating new forms of information technology into their practice.
- Operating within an ethical framework of practice.

Chappell, C.; 2000; The standing of VET professionals, a discussion paper presented at the Australian VET Teacher Education Colloquium, Canberra, April.

This paper details what Chappell sees as the current national crisis in the professional standing of VET professionals. Signs of the crisis include:

- A decline in the demand for university training courses for VET practitioners.
- A significant shift to casualisation in the sector.
- A move to non-degree workplace trainer qualifications, especially in the private and non-government sectors.

Chappell argues that we are in a transitional period and that current trends will continue to challenge VET professionalism. He cites as examples of these trends the changing nature of work and technology, the commodification of the curriculum, increased competition, blurring of boundaries with school education and the shift of learning away from institutions into the workplace.

The field is now so diversified that there is no longer a single professional identity. The article concludes by arguing for a model of professional development that recognises and accommodates the multiple and changing nature of contemporary VET practice.


This article offers a critique of the policies which have produced competency based training. Cornford claims that, in its narrow focus on the end product, CBT has ignored the importance of learning processes. He argues in favour of curriculum as a means of providing guidance for teachers. This can offer valuable input to less experienced teachers and also to those who have received minimal or no teacher training.

Kell's article highlights the ever-shortening 'shelf life' of knowledge, skills and jobs in the age of globalism and looks at the implications for the work of VET teachers. Changed patterns of demand mean that organisations like TAFE are now shifting into activities which reflect similar divisions in the workforce. These activities are:

- Provision of services to the professional and technical elite. In this model TAFE will be used as a skills 'finishing school' for university graduates.
- Provision of 'just in time' skills for workers needing to be retrained. These activities will be characterised by short, modularised courses.
- Provision of services which provide skills training to 'bolster the flagging work ethic of the unemployed'.

For teachers, the changes are producing tensions relating to the nature of their work, their relationship with the organisations they work for and with their students.


As a result of several major changes affecting the VET sector, including marketisation of the public sector, technological developments and globalisation, Lepani claims that VET practitioners will need to diversify their practice. In place of classroom based, 'stand and deliver' teaching, she foresees an expanded range of roles. These will include:

- Specialist learning facilitator
- Market analyst and researcher
- Consultant to enterprises and industry groups
- Developer of strategic partnerships
- Knowledge management strategist
- Business manager
- Communications strategist
- Career pathing strategist
- Assessment and accreditation specialist

This article examines the implications of the change from competences to standards for initial teacher training in England for school teachers. While the move was intended to make the basis for accreditation of practice transparent, Reynolds argues that the standards have serious limitations. Citing Shulman (1987) she notes that there is a rich and complex knowledge base for effective teaching which includes: content knowledge, general pedagogical knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners, knowledge of educational contexts and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values. These areas have been largely ignored in the development of the standards.


In her paper, Robinson looks at the way in which TAFE teachers are positioned in the national training discourse. She examines several of the strategy papers that underpin the national training system and notes that the term ‘teacher’ has virtually disappeared from the language of policy documents. Even ‘trainer’ is becoming less common. By contrast, the voice of industry has become much more powerful. TAFE teacher professionalism is also threatened because they now compete with industry trainers who often have minimal or no teaching related qualifications.

It is suggested that TAFE teachers adopt a different approach to raising their profile, that of constructing themselves as ‘experts’. Appropriate strategies to support this approach might include promoting practitioner research and specialist expertise in areas such as flexible delivery materials and programs.


Robson highlights what she perceives as the marginality and low status of the further education sector in the United Kingdom and its failure to progress towards full professional status. Although the sector has grown dramatically in numerical terms, it is characterised by extreme variability in:

- background of teachers
- entry level qualifications
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- the nature of teaching undertaken, especially the split between 'practical' and 'academic' cultures within different disciplinary groups.

All of these factors make it difficult for further education teachers to develop a vocational identity (that of professional teacher) as distinct from the welder, fashion designer, surveyor etc who happens to be teaching.


This paper examines the impact of current reforms in VET (especially those related to decentralisation and the training market) on the work of teachers. It focuses on the way staff in one Victorian institute of TAFE dealt with the changing demands on them and their work. The animal care department is cited as an illustration of 'strategic compliance'. The department has become more like a business; however the staff have re-asserted their professionalism by taking initiatives in curriculum revision, development of mixed modes of delivery, and holistic assessment strategies. They have also found ways to manage their spiralling workload. The strategy of involving industry in the assessment process has enhanced the credibility of the department and provided opportunities for professional renewal. Meanwhile the operation of the animal clinic and the sale of course materials have generated income which, in turn, has enabled the department to extend its course provision.

Seddon and Brown conclude that strategic compliance enabled the animal care staff to bend with shifting sectoral and institutional demands in ways that protected their educational and other professional values.


This report contains 28 recommendations to the Government. They include a 'renegotiation of VET objectives with major participants in the training network', but focus mainly on 'strengthening institutional arrangements which ensure quality control processes'. Several recommendations contain clauses that are highly relevant to questions of VET teacher expertise and recognition of the value of such expertise in national policy making. The most significant is

Recommendation 27. Restoring the skills and qualifications of VET teachers and trainers

An issue of concern to all stakeholders is the level of skills and qualifications of VET teachers and trainers. The Committee gained the impression that in recent years there has been a lowering of standards required by employing authorities.
The issues surrounding VET teacher and trainer qualifications are not new to the Committee, having been canvassed in some detail during its inquiry into the status of the teaching profession in 1997-8, which resulted in the report, A Class Act, Inquiry into the Status of the Teaching Profession. The Committee made a number of recommendations in that report and, in the light of evidence put to it about the status and qualifications of VET teachers and trainers in the current inquiry, believes those recommendations are equally relevant and applicable in the VET context.

The Committee recommends that:

(a) a national professional teaching standards and registration body be established with responsibility, authority and resources to develop and maintain standards of professional practice for VET teachers and trainers. The national body should work closely with state governments, industry and peak teaching organisations. The national body should:

- establish national standards of professional practice which take into account what teachers should be expected to know and be able to do to facilitate learning;
- certify levels of entry into the profession, criteria for re-registration and recognition of advanced standing in the profession for full-time, part-time and casual teachers;
- accredit programs of initial teacher training and establish the professional development framework for the maintenance of professional expertise for all teachers;
- make recommendations to ANTA MINCO on priorities for national professional development programs;
- assist teachers and trainers to improve their skills; and
- manage a register of teachers and trainers who meet and maintain professional standards and are therefore eligible for employment by public and private training providers.

(b) The national professional teaching standards and registration body be empowered to delegate aspects of its authority, and such tasks as it sees fit, to appropriate agencies or teacher associations.

(c) Teachers’ and trainers’ registration fees be levied as an offset to costs.

(d) The National Qualifications and Quality Assurance Authority recommended in this report take on the role of the national professional teaching standards and registration body.

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Smith’s article examines models of staff development from both the school education sector and the private enterprise sector and asks whether they are suitable for use with VET staff. Compared with school teachers, VET teachers:

- have a greater diversity of background
- are more likely to be part time or casual
- have a stronger need to keep up with developments in their own specialist field.

Enterprise models of staff training are also likely to be inappropriate because VET does not deliver a 'product' in the way that enterprises do. Moreover, VET teachers have taken more responsibility for their own professional development than people working in most enterprises.

It is argued that action learning and work based learning models may have limited value, especially as more VET teachers enter the sector with minimal teaching qualifications.

In conclusion, Smith argues for a higher level of spending on staff development in VET (especially for part time staff) and also for an appropriate selection of options from the range of models available.


Sobski distinguishes between a curriculum and a unit of competence in a training package. Whereas a curriculum is a structured, sequenced plan that assists learners to move towards the outcomes they want to achieve, a unit of competence simply describes what a competent worker does in the workplace. Developing curriculum requires knowledge about how people learn; it involves grouping skills and knowledge from a number of different units of competence, moving from the simple and underpinning skills to the more complex.

It would be wasteful to expect every teacher to interpret training packages and to develop their own curriculum or learning plan. National or state-developed curriculum can free the teacher to focus on the best learning strategies for particular students. Sobski argues that training packages should not replace curriculum.

This review aimed to explore the ‘cutting edge of professional development (PD) in VET’. It makes several key findings:

Innovation in PD is defined as ‘that which has the potential to assist VET practitioners prepare themselves for future trends associated with globalisation and marketisation of education and knowledge, and the new technologies’. PD is a crucial strategy for implementing change and developing quality. PD is most successful when it is intended to benefit both the individual and the organisation.

Management support has the potential to encourage or stifle new initiatives. Understanding of contextual factors (e.g., national training agenda, relationship between initial and ongoing teacher development) is crucial to successful design and delivery of PD.

The section on types of innovative provision includes information on flexible delivery and associated modes, work-based learning, mentoring, self-directed learning, and leadership and management.
5.0 Findings

5.1 Learner focus

The teachers interviewed in this study all demonstrated a strong concern for their students as individuals, and a powerful commitment to establishing a positive learning environment for them. This learner focus was accompanied by a marked absence of references to the traditional role of teacher as the central source of knowledge and power. More often they spoke of the need for teachers to be 'ego-free', to facilitate rather than lecture and to share power rather than to exercise it.

5.1.1 Empathy and respect

Underpinning the student focus were expressions of empathy with learners and respect for their backgrounds. One teacher talked about remembering what it was like to be a student and the need for 'putting yourself in your student's place', another of 'looking at (the material) from their perspective' when planning how best to deliver it. Some participants mentioned the particular vulnerabilities of adult learners: 'This could be their last chance. It's important to recognise the courage of later year learners and respect it'.

Such sentiments were not mere rhetoric; they were matched by accounts of program planning and delivery which clearly addressed the characteristics of learners. For example:

Good teaching is about 'knowing how to best deliver this material to this particular group of people'.

'You need to think about who your learners are – and plan around them. ... It's also important to include the community of which your learners are a part. Developing and using contacts in business community and involving those people with what happens in the class room – this provides currency and authenticity.'

Other teachers referred to the need to build trust and rapport: 'This takes time .... learners all bring "baggage". In language based programs, values and opinions are exposed. You have to address the issue of confidentiality explicitly.'

Another spoke of 'establishing a relationship that is cooperative rather than about teacher power – they need to feel they can tell you when they're not coping/following'.

5.1.2 Learning styles and stages

The teachers' commitment to individual learners showed clearly when they described the ways in which they adjusted their approach to take account of diverse learning styles and needs in their groups. Many referred to one or more
theories of learning preferences and spoke of consciously presenting material in different ways to cater for them. One person claimed that good teaching involves 'being able to "read" people and evaluate their needs. People have different values, skills, styles – and this affects the way they learn.' Another said that she keeps a 'profile of learners in my head all the time. I often think about what I am doing and why I am using these materials. What is it doing for the student? It's important, but often hard when time is short.'

Often there was concern expressed for those who find learning difficult: 'I try to apply my knowledge about how different people learn. I need to use different media and strategies and seek feedback, especially from those who seem to be struggling.' Or as a Welfare teacher put it: 'I think about catering for both the beginners and the knowledgeable enthusiasts who want extra; not just teaching to the most teachable. It's about working out how to get to everyone.' Another teacher talked about being 'conscious of anxious learners and personal aspects. There's a need for empathy and recognition of the fact that people need a certain level of emotional comfort to learn. When people are struggling with something, they hate it ... we need to support and encourage and work through it with learners.'

5.1.3 Student needs versus syllabus requirements

Most participants seemed to experience some tension in reconciling what they perceived as the requirements of the syllabus with the needs of students. However, almost without exception, this group of teachers appeared to have found ways to resolve the tension without disadvantaging their learners. As a ceramics teacher expressed it: 'The real teaching began when I was able to marry what the syllabus requires with what the students needed, and retain integrity.'

Good teaching was seen to involve moulding the syllabus so that it meets the needs of a particular group of learners. Comments like the following recurred frequently: 'You need to care about the students as well as the subject and be able to connect with where the students are at'; 'I cater for students first, curriculum second – and develop the learning outcomes around the needs of students.' 'Preparation of a lesson must be geared to individuals in the group, not just the name of course and subject.'

Some of the participants clearly saw it as their professional responsibility to modify the syllabus: 'Teachers have to be able to exercise their own judgment in order to modify content, emphasise some things, minimise others. This doesn't mean ignoring the learning outcomes – just that a good teacher will make adjustments to suit the students. A module is not sacred.'

5.1.4 The learning environment

Given the concern of this group of teachers with the needs of their learners, it is not surprising to find that they devote a lot of attention to creating a positive
learning environment. In particular, they consider and manage factors such as group dynamics and of arousing and maintaining enthusiasm.

Understanding group dynamics is seen as essential because learning is usually a social activity. 'A group works well when the group is supported by friendships and a social element – what they are getting from each other is important and a most valuable experience' said one participant.

Another teacher described the all-important first contact with a new group: 'The first session/day is about establishing the group and providing the structure for the course ... I get to know people through their applications and feel I have a relationship before they even arrive ... We spend the first session developing relationships within the group. Respect and consideration of others and individual/group needs is very necessary.'

However, another person explains her need to vary the initial approach according to the learners: 'I'm aware of the forming, norming, storming and performing phases, but need to respond appropriately according to the group. Some really appreciate a "getting to know you" morning tea/lunch, while others have the strong expectation that they'll get straight into the course and would regard morning tea as a waste of time'.

Development of trust, respect and responsibility were mentioned frequently when teachers discussed group dynamics: 'You try to foster an atmosphere of respect, dignity and responsibility. Even first year students shouldn't be treated as babies - they can have a break, go for a smoke etc without having to ask permission. They respond well to being treated as adults.'

Creating enthusiasm among learners is a recurring theme and teachers in this study approach it in a variety of ways. Almost everyone mentioned the need for 'passion' about their subject and often noted the way that a good teacher somehow generates energy and is able to 'light up' their students. For some people, this involves the 'ability to make things memorable' by putting on a performance and assuming character roles with props and costumes. For others, it's about drawing out the students' own knowledge and experience: 'I try to extract ideas/principles from their experiences. Much of the learning happens among the students themselves as they discuss what they're doing and things they've seen at work. This occurs more in the classroom than at work because they're all on the same level and they feel OK about pooling their experiences.'

Celebrating the learners' achievements along the way (not just at the end of the program) is regarded as another significant way to maintain enthusiasm.

It appears from comments made by this group of 'expert' VET teachers that they strive to be learner-centred in their practice. This is so even when pressures, such as the need to achieve a set of competencies in a training package, militate against it. These teachers take pride in the professional expertise that enables them to manage the learning process in ways that benefit the person as a whole
rather than just that part acquiring certain skills. Learning is seen as a valuable end in itself, as well as a means to employment or competence.

5.2 Technical knowledge and currency

Thorough knowledge of subject area and maintenance of technical expertise were mentioned as critical attributes by virtually all participants. Their comments were essentially very similar so they are covered fairly briefly here. It was interesting to note that, while teachers regarded this knowledge as essential, many added that expertise alone was not sufficient. It had to be accompanied by 'passion' or 'enthusiasm' for the teacher to be truly effective.

5.2.1 Knowledge of subject area

Knowing your content really well was frequently linked with confidence and credibility in the teaching role. Many participants spoke of their confidence developing over several years as they combined teaching with further reading, reflection and trying new ways to 'get the message across'. One person referred to the way her knowledge has 'crystallised' with time and experience. Another commented that it was only when he began teaching that he fully understood 'why things were done the way they were' in his trade.

It seems that a kind of synergy operates when teachers reflect on their practice over a period of years. While knowledge of subject matter underpins good teaching, the teaching experience itself can lead to a deeper understanding of the content or technical skills. The ability to link learning and theory with the real world (sometimes referred to as 'praxis') was characteristic of this group of experienced teachers.

5.2.2 Maintaining currency

Almost everyone in the study expressed the view that it was essential for teachers to keep up-to-date with changes in their industry and to maintain their knowledge and skills (and hence their credibility with learners). 'You need to be aware of the reality of the workplace. This affects your credibility and confidence in the classroom.' At the same time, many teachers admitted that it is difficult to keep up and that 'stagnation is a problem'. This is felt most acutely in areas such as information technology, but applies also to fields like human services, trades and language teaching.

Participants employed various strategies in their attempts to stay current. Some had undertaken Return to Industry activities. Others made a habit of reading trade and professional journals, industry updates and accessing internet mailing lists. Many expressed the wish to attend an occasional conference or workshop but noted that the cost for country teachers was prohibitive because such activities were usually held in city venues.
Others, generally trade teachers, systematically maintained their industry networks. One teacher spoke of using his contacts to find out 'the tricks of the trade - how they do things now'. Another would invite suppliers to come into class and describe new products and services.

5.2.3 Commitment to professional renewal

Typically, the teachers who were interviewed tended to assume much of the responsibility for their own professional development and improvement: 'I'm self-driven in PD and take up industry opportunities where I can.' Almost without exception, they placed a very high value on keeping up with changes in their industry, on knowing about 'the reality of the workplace' and on refreshing their industry knowledge and skills.

A few had managed to integrate industry and teaching work throughout their careers by moving in and out of teaching. One had turned a Return to Industry project into an ongoing, voluntary arrangement in order to develop further her counselling skills. This was a significant commitment since it involved the loss of pay for one day a week. Some participate in national projects such as Framing the Future or Learnscope where they can extend their knowledge and skills and, most importantly, discuss their practice with other teachers.

This section has focussed on teacher strategies to remain current in their subject area. Not surprisingly, they are equally concerned about their capacity to teach and to facilitate learning. We have made a somewhat arbitrary decision to separate this element from technical expertise and to address it in the following section. However it was clear throughout the interview process that teachers themselves integrated the two elements very closely in their practice.

5.3 Expertise in teaching and learning methodologies

The participants in this study spoke at length about how they manage the teaching/learning process. Good teachers carry with them resources which enable them to respond readily to variations in learners, curriculum or situation. The volume and consistency of the data suggest that the knowledge and skills associated with the facilitation of learning go to the heart of a person's identity as a vocational teacher. There is a significant distinction to be made between a VET teacher with a technical background and a tradesperson (or professional) who does a bit of teaching or training. It was noticeable that the highly experienced full time teachers we interviewed had clearly made the shift to identifying primarily as a VET professional. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not so frequently the case with part time teaching staff. Perhaps one reason for the difference lies in the fact that full time TAFE teachers in NSW have all been required to undertake professional (that is, tertiary) level teacher education programs.
Participants’ discussion of teaching and learning processes has been organised here around three major areas: using appropriate resources and strategies; organising and structuring learning; and, applying theories about learning.

5.3.1 Using resources and strategies for learning

One of the most striking attributes of this group of teachers was their confidence to draw on 'a bag full of techniques'. They talked about choosing the strategies most relevant to particular groups or individuals and about varying their approach to keep learners interested: ‘You can gauge the level of response from the group and change your approach accordingly.’ This flexibility had developed with experience and some teachers commented that, by contrast, novice teachers were far more likely to stick rigidly to an approach, even when it became clear that it was not working.

Many participants said they gave a 'high priority to planning and preparation of resources'. Team projects were significant and teachers wished there was more funding available to support this sort of activity. Exposure to other people's resources was seen as positive: 'Good teachers share resources - this lifts everybody's game.' One participant (whose practice consists almost entirely of distance education) clearly viewed learning materials as even more critical to the learning process than did the face to face teachers. She emphasised the importance of developing resources that are 'structured around adult learners' needs'.

Particular strategies that people had found effective included using problem-solving scenarios, various questioning and interviewing techniques, role plays and group work. There were many comments about effective learning being 'active' or 'interactive' and participants generally tried to avoid the limitations of 'passive' learning situations.

5.3.2 Organising and structuring learning

The ability of good teachers to organise and structure learning effectively underpins their success in the classroom, workplace or wherever learning takes place. When teaching looks easy and relaxed, when learners are engaged and the session is flowing smoothly, then it is certain that preparation and planning have been thorough. While the teachers we interviewed rarely made explicit reference to particular theories of learning, it was clear that they were applying fundamental learning principles to the task of structuring their sessions.

The following comments illustrate the high value that even very experienced practitioners place on organisation and structure:

'I plan for every session. Thorough lesson preparation leads to a smooth flow. It's is important to prepare for variety too.'
'Structuring lessons is very important. There is an art and craft to designing a lesson – balancing the activities such as lecturing, discussion etc.'

'Good teaching is about having clear lesson structure; being very clear about what you’re doing in the session – telling them in the intro and repeating the main ideas at the end.'

'You have to be organised. I outline on the board what this session will cover so that they see how if follows from the previous one ...'

'Teaching involves lots of organisation – basically the mechanics seem really fundamental – lesson prep and organisation from one week to the next, sequencing the flow of learning. Often I think in reverse. What is the end result? I work backwards, plotting the sequence of learning.'

The need to be really well organised was also seen to flow through to assessment and feedback:

'I’m careful to keep students informed and involved in the learning process – for example with student assessment guides, assessment events/dates, handouts, past papers, marking guides, explanation of results, progress reports etc.' explained one teacher. ‘You have to ensure honesty with feedback and transparency in assessment’ said another. 'It's important to provide encouragement and support through constructive feedback,' was another comment we heard frequently.

When teachers talked about the macro picture of curriculum development and implementing training packages (as distinct from lesson preparation), they made clear distinctions between experienced practitioners and novices. Expert teachers seem confident to design a program by translating a list of competencies into an appropriate sequence of learning activities. As one person expressed it, 'A good teacher can breathe life into a syllabus or training package – sequence it in ways that make sense, weave in the necessary underpinning knowledge ....'

Another teacher spoke of his confidence to approach a syllabus in a relaxed and flexible way: 'Experienced teachers can take a syllabus and see how the modules are linked. This means they can choose a pathway through it to suit the learners. They are confident that they can get the important skills and concepts across without sticking rigidly to a prescriptive syllabus.'

This level of expertise could sometimes be harnessed to compensate for perceived weaknesses in the current national approach: 'Good teachers can make even a poor system work. I'm concerned about some of the changes occurring over last 10 years. The links between theory and practice are comparatively weak. I worry about the completion rate of modules and what the students have actually learned in a deep way. As the number of modules has exploded, I see problems of overlapping, duplication, gaps, quantum leaps, inconsistencies in the amount of learning required.'
Less experienced teachers were regarded as having a limited understanding of the learning process and therefore a greater dependence on a fairly rigid, 'recipe' approach to teaching: 'Some teachers with only Cat 4 etc tend to be more rigid and structured. They are less holistic in their approach - and don’t always see the big picture.... Novices are always in a rush and less relaxed. The expert can slow down, confident that a particular skill can always be learned in another situation - he takes a holistic, big picture approach.'

5.3.3 Contextualising theory

In teaching their own subject matter, these teachers were very conscious of the need to integrate theory and practice. Often they would refer to the need to contextualise theory and relate it to what happens in the students' workplaces. The following comments are characteristic:

'It's vital to link learning and theory with the real world. The real world of the workplace complicates theory. During one flexible delivery project, the team was forced to adjust its approach in response to the reality of the business and needs of the (disabled) learners and their supervisors.'

'You have to ensure that everything has a practical application. We help them see that theorists might use big words but really, it's part of what you do at work. For example, in group work, I might give them something theoretical to read beforehand and then ask "How does this operate in practice, in groups that you know about?". It lets them see they have the theoretical knowledge.'

'Good teachers have the ability to link theoretical explanations (eg coefficient of expansion?) to things that happen in the students' workplaces.'

'Activities need to be authentic – role plays can be a problem as people often struggle with notion of being in the role while they need to be learning themselves - often real projects are more constructive.'

'Our new course is project-based - so the projects are relevant to the students' working lives.'

'Bit by bit, you feed in the theory that relates to the practical, bring in theory in a way that they do not even know it is there – surround them in the images that make them feel comfortable – then teaching is easy.'

5.3.4 Applying theories about learning

As mentioned earlier, references to learning theory do not normally form part of the discourse of VET teachers. A few admitted that, despite their pre-conceptions, 'the professional teaching studies give confidence and the ability to explain why you're doing something (that is, to know some of the theory behind teaching
practices). Several of the participants conceded that what they'd encountered in teacher education courses assumed greater meaning later in their careers: 'The relevance and application of theories covered in teacher training—and then not really understood— are now very evident in everyday teaching/learning situations and support teaching/facilitation skills.' Many expressed the view that 'you need teaching experience to benefit from an input of theory' and sometimes added that they were 'ready for another burst'.

However, our interviews demonstrated that this group of teachers was well aware of the processes that affect how people learn. In general terms they mentioned adult learning theory and referred to the need to cater for diverse learning styles, to foster autonomy in their learners, to promote active rather than passive learning, to use group dynamics productively and to capitalise on adult learners' knowledge and experience. Their comments suggested that they try to encourage the type of 'deep' learning described by Biggs (1999: 16 – 17).

Most participants mentioned their awareness of different learning styles (and sometimes their own), together with the need to cater for them by providing a range of experiences for learners. 'I address different learning styles (left/right brain; visual, auditory, feeling) .... This often empowers students to reflect on why "school" learning was a negative experience.'

Group dynamics was identified as a significant issue. As well as recognising the stages in group formation, teachers sometimes intervened to foster positive dynamics:

'There are skills in developing initial stages of group dynamic that set the scene and determine how quickly the group will settle in. .... What do learners hope to achieve? At the end of the day the students need to be clear about where they are and have a picture of what is going to happen to them — they need to be given their own space and be part of a new group.'

'I use group work to encourage sharing of ideas and experiences — vary complexity in order to help both high and low achievers. With group work I set parameters for the group in the first class and start developing individual and group respect.'

Participants seemed keen to avoid practices which would encourage learners to be dependent on them. In fact many emphasised the importance of developing autonomy and the ability to think independently.

'I encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning — encourage additional reading through provision of resources, value learning from self-discovery which encourages learners to take charge of their own learning.'

'I help them develop a reliance on themselves and on each other. ... students will learn far more from each other than what they actually learn from me.'
Analysis of teaching and learning into separate components tends to over-simplify what is a very complex and interwoven process. This study has shown that good teachers or facilitators manage the constantly changing variables in ways that may seem deceptively easy at times. However beneath the surface we found a depth of experience and knowledge, together with a commitment to reflect on practice and to experiment with new ways to meet the needs of learners.

5.4 Personal attributes and values

As researchers, we decided to include this section because the teachers in the study appeared to share a number of significant beliefs, values and attributes that we had not addressed in the preceding analysis. The common threads that emerged were communication skills, a passion for facilitating learning and a commitment to one’s own learning and professional renewal. So pervasive were variations of these themes that we have come to think that they do form part of what constitutes ‘excellence’ in VET teaching. Whether or not such attributes can be learned is, of course, debatable. According to one participant, they constitute the ‘raw talent’ that some people bring to the job. Another commented that teaching always felt comfortable and ‘just seemed to fit’ his personality.

5.4.1 Passion for facilitating learning

Our interview notes abound in anecdotes that show teachers ‘getting a kick out of witnessing changes in students’. Some of these stories carried quite an emotional charge as in the case of the student who finally completed a practical project and told his teacher, ‘That’s the first thing I’ve ever made that’s worked!’ Feedback such as this seems to sustain teachers’ beliefs in the value of their jobs.

One person spoke of the ‘privilege’ involved in ‘touching people’s lives’ and seeing them develop. He added that he held a ‘philosophical belief in the transformative nature of education, particularly for students who feel disempowered’. Another observed that teaching was about ‘helping people find their potential .... realising that if people think you are interested in them, self-esteem improves and learning can take place’. A female teacher said she was ‘driven by helping people achieve results’. Another man claimed, ‘You need to love what you are doing. Students get caught up in the learning if you really enjoy what you are doing.’ Someone else referred to the need for ‘passion for what you do. Through your classes you can bring light to a learner’s eyes’.

These comments suggest a high level of commitment to the ‘vocation’ of teaching and, as a result, most of the teachers interviewed seem to experience considerable intrinsic satisfaction with their role.

5.4.2 Commitment to professional renewal
This attribute is closely associated with the previous point and involves both an interest in learning for its own sake and a strong commitment to continual improvement of teaching practice. No one we spoke to claimed to be satisfied with the current level of their learning. In fact, most of these teachers adopted a somewhat questioning and self-critical stance in regard to their own practice.

As one teacher explained it: 'You need to ... recognise strengths and weaknesses and bring to bear what you can. What you are lacking you seek in other ways. It is important to recognise shortcomings and ask what am I going to do about it? .... The learning never ends ... and the day I think it does, I'm in big trouble!' A similar view was expressed in this statement: 'You have to accept that you don't always get it right - be forgiving of yourself but reflect on how to do it better next time.'

In terms of professional renewal, some teachers talked about doing refresher courses and some about learning from students. 'Expert teachers are willing to accept that they can and do learn from their students' was a typical comment, as was 'I'm still learning - from students and their responses.'

Collegiality was also seen as valuable source of learning: One teacher spoke of the value of 'being able to question your practice with other teachers.' Another commented: 'I enjoy learning and gain from peripheral exposure to what people around me are doing, particularly those who demonstrate good practice. We often compare notes.'

However the most frequently mentioned practice was that of critical reflection on their own performance. A surprising number undertook some self-evaluation after a session. One person described how he keeps a class activity diary where he records what he wants to achieve in a session, then reviews how it went. He referred to it as 'taking a fairly critical approach' which stops him 'getting stale'. Another commented that: 'My most effective learning comes from evaluating my own performance .... I still evaluate all programs because I want and need to be a better teacher. Reflection is the key.'

5.4.3 Communication skills

Many comments related to the need for excellent communication skills. Terms like 'clear communication of ideas', 'good social interaction', 'openness, friendliness' and 'rapport' were mentioned often. Some teachers expressed the view that good communication skills could even compensate for limited technical knowledge at times: 'Ability to get on well with people is probably the most important factor. This can make up for some lack of expertise or preparation,' one teacher observed. Another commented that 'You don't have to know everything - students will forgive you. On other hand, they'll sometimes complain, "He was a really clever guy but I didn't understand him ..."'.

Participants were divided in their opinion as to whether good communication skills were innate or whether they could be developed. One teacher was clear about
the fact that her skills had improved over the years: 'I've developed confidence in dealing with difficult situations and people..... in my personal ability to work with people, developing good rapport and mutual respect.' However another thought that people were either 'natural communicators' or not, whereas teaching involved a 'raft of skills' that could be learned.

The themes emerging from this area of the data support the idea that good teachers are both passionate about their jobs and strongly committed to them. When we asked participants about the major influences on their development, it became apparent that they, in their turn, had often been inspired by similarly enthusiastic and dedicated teachers. We take up this issue of how people learn to be teachers in the following section of the report.

### 5.5 Influences on teacher development

Opinions of the value of formal teacher education programs were diverse, with the majority of teachers interviewed suggesting that the content and delivery of their respective Dip Eds and Grad Dips could have been more appropriate to their needs as new teachers. It is interesting to note that while many teachers expressed dissatisfaction with formal teacher training delivery, it is very evident from their own analysis of their respective facilitation styles that they were incorporating and developing an extensive range of adult learning strategies and facilitation skills in their day-to-day practice. On reflection, several of the participants were able to link their theoretical learning with current practice.

#### 5.5.1 Teacher Education

The following comments capture the criticism expressed about some of the early teacher education experiences of our participants.

'The Grad Dip had little if any influence, possibly due to the approach taken and dedication or lack thereof of some teacher educators. There were more examples of poor practice than good practice. It was useless! I learnt more in a BMI Course.'

'The Grad Dip was useless! Lecturers didn't practise what they said, turned up late or not at all, used poor OHTs, seated us in rows; the theory wasn't applied. They just weren't inspiring. BMI was so much better!'

'Teacher training was moderately valuable in relation to teaching skills, but it had a greater social benefit. My most memorable learning occurred from associating with other teachers and the cross pollination of ideas.'

Another interviewee described his teacher training experience as like being in a 'mushroom factory'. He would have liked more emphasis on basics like what to teach and how to do it. Another part-time teacher enrolled in a Grad Dip Ed and withdrew after a year because of the 'appalling standard of material and
feedback from lecturers’. This teacher went on to comment that he has since done BMI and NTL programs and learnt a lot of useful practical skills in these courses.

Even among those who expressed strong views about the inadequacies of teacher education programs, there were several participants who commented that the teaching psychology component had been valuable in the development of their teaching expertise.

'Parts of the course were useful; I enjoyed psychology ... but there was a hell of a lot that could have been better'.

'I loved educational psychology, even though I didn't see the relevance at the time; I do now though.'

One interviewee, a part-time teacher of ten years, had avoided teacher training as he was not convinced he was going to get anything from it. He described himself as a person who thrived on interactive learning, not a 'book person' and wanted to learn in other ways. Once he made a conscious decision that he wanted to teach on a full-time basis, he started a Grad Dip in VET to increase his chance of appointment. He acknowledges that he has gained knowledge from his study, but has found distance education with such a strong reliance on written media personally frustrating and in conflict with his preferred learning style.

Another participant noted that everyone he spoke to had a negative view of teacher training so he was influenced by that and it took a while to dawn that some of the course was important at a personal level as well as preparation for a teaching career. Another commented that 'professional teacher training was good, despite general perception that it was a 'wank' (early 70s). This teacher didn't take it seriously until a head teacher encouraged him to put some effort into the assignments. With a different approach and reward for effort, he developed an enthusiasm for his study and acknowledged that he benefited greatly from the experience.

In contrast, some of the other participants noted very positive outcomes from their teacher education experiences. One teacher commented that for him teacher training was very significant. 'I learnt by being a student myself and reflecting on how I learnt best. I singled out one lecturer who was an excellent teacher himself and who modelled group learning.' A communications teacher noted 'I had excellent experiences in gaining qualifications, mainly due to lecturers/tutors who were seconded to the uni for 2-3 years and were very capable in delivering a hands-on teaching program.'

Another participant working in the communications area acknowledged that her Dip Ed was ok, 'especially useful for planning and pacing.' However, the learning gained in the Grad Dip she completed some years later was more significant because she'd had enough experience to relate the content to 'real' situations.
Approximately half the participants referred to the value of Train the Trainer and Basic Methods of Instruction programs as a skills basis for teaching practice: "It (BMT) was really useful. I found it very good, practical and loved the little technical skills that they taught." Another teacher commented that: "BMT was excellent with basics and also uncovering the importance of relating content to learner needs."

Several interviewees specifically commented on the benefits of blending teacher education programs with practice. As one participant noted: "Beginning teachers need a combination of theory and practical work. Unis gave theory but the prac needs to be taught in campuses via tutors or mentors or some kind of 'critical friend' process."

A head teacher commented: "The induction of new teachers needs to be a phased in process. At the beginning new teachers are too panicked to take in more than survival tips. They need opportunities to come back later and absorb more information about teaching and learning." And one of our interviewees, a current part-time information technology teacher, suggested that she would like to be an apprentice to a good teacher or several teachers. She wants to observe their teaching and discuss it with them and to have one of them act as a mentor for her.

5.5.2 Observing best practice

While there was diverse opinion about the value of teacher education programs, the teachers interviewed overwhelming supported the developmental benefits of observing best practice, mentoring and working in a collegial culture in which discussion of educational issues and mentoring were the norm. The following comments convey the developmental impact of this experience.

"More meaningful learning (than that which occurred in formal teacher education programs) occurred with colleagues, bouncing ideas and discussing what happened in 'real colleges'."

"My own practice was most influenced by older, more experienced teachers who demonstrated honesty, work ethic and a professional approach. I still gain from observing other teachers - usually informally, and reflecting on my own practice."

"I often listen in on other classes and compare the content and delivery strategies with what I am doing."

"I've always borrowed from the skills and strategies of good teachers who all communicated enthusiasm for their subject."

"I've worked with some brilliant teachers and learned from them. The excellent lecturers at UTS also helped by modelling good practice, but you could also learn from the poor ones."

As another participant put it: "Being exposed to a wide range of teachers and educational experiences - both good and bad, is very beneficial. You learn from them both."
The impact of sectional management and the roles adopted by head teachers was a major influence on several teachers interviewed.

'The main influence on my development was a particular head teacher. I absorbed from him and have never forgotten it. He was a good communicator, treated other people with respect, gave them a chance, even when they played up.'

'The major influence on my practice was a head teacher at Dubbo. There was a culture in the section that relied heavily on feedback – getting student feedback was a normal part of practice. Her approach to staff was professional, she was committed and interested and adopted a democratic leadership style; however she had some "not negotiables" in terms of students. I think what I remember most was her strong pastoral role with a focus on feedback.'

'I worked with a very dynamic and well organised head teacher who demonstrated expertise in project work and different ways of doing things. There was cooperative learning between teachers and excellent modelling by the head teacher and other staff.'

Several participants referred to the impact on their own development of the teachers who taught them in their trade courses. One teacher who acknowledged a very strong link with his trade training commented that: 'The teachers had integrity as teachers, they inspired their students and were exceptional role models.' This teacher often draws on his own experience as a learner when teaching. Another teacher commented that he had had a 'wonderful' music teacher: 'I learnt so much from him – he was patient, tolerant, never put people down. A big influence.'

Other teachers referred to the benefits of mentoring: 'Mentoring is important as it questions values and leads to changes in people that flow on to other areas of their lives.' Another spoke of the value of peer support, which was reiterated by others who noted that: 'Informal mentoring is valuable, both mentor and mentee gain from the experience;' and 'Mentoring is really useful. The section still does some peer mentoring of each other's sessions.' Another participant referred to: 'Professional collegiality, it's about being able to question your practice with other teachers.'

5.5.3 Reflecting on Practice

Reflection on practice was frequently identified as a conscious, yet often automatic behaviour. One participant commented that 'Good teachers apply critical thinking to their work. How did that session go? How could it be improved?' Another noted: 'Confidence to get up and deliver comes with time and learning from your failures.' Another described it as 'taking a fairly critical approach'.
The comments suggest that reflecting on practice has led to both broader knowledge of subject area and increased confidence in teaching ability. Statements about informal evaluation/reflecting on practice and formal end of module or end of course evaluation were frequent, and identified as a major influence in the development of teaching excellence. As one teacher put it: 'The most effective learning comes from evaluating my own performance'. Another expressed the value of teaching other teachers: 'Teaching teachers NTL was significant. It raised awareness, made me reflect on my own practice. I had to model what I was teaching.'

5.5.4 Thoughts on professional development

The influence of individually initiated and organisational professional development programs was commented on in all interviews. Many of the teachers identified a range of formal and informal activities which had led to increased confidence in their ability to maintain currency and improve their practice.

The importance of ongoing professional development was expressed by an information technology teacher who said: 'You need regular input and challenge because the field has changed so much. Otherwise you can stagnate and keep doing the same old things.'

Several of the participants noted specific benefits of PD as new knowledge, networking, and development of a critical approach to one’s own work.

Useful PD activities identified by the teachers included:

- forums where people with common interests could share experiences, resources, ideas, and responses to challenging situations;
- mentoring,
- networking with colleagues and industry,
- further study,
- return to industry programs and professional updates,
- computer workshops to improve efficiency,
- localised work related projects, and
- Learnscope and Framing the Future projects.

One teacher noted that while collegial networking is vital for professional development: 'it is hard to achieve when you’re a part timer and/or on a full program – it happens informally but needs to be recognised as a valid form of PD. 'Another participant's informal PD involves keeping up with what is new at his students' workplaces and reading trade magazines. Another seeks out workshops of interest and attends at his own expense – he commented that it was his choice and seemed easier just to organise it himself rather than working through the bureaucracy. Another teacher suggested that although some staff development activities have been useful, he had gained more from self-driven professional development. He takes up industry and any available opportunities and does not focus on boundaries, but focuses on needs.
Several teachers commented on the changing nature of organisational professional development activities within TAFE. There was general consensus that staff development/professional development activities over the last ten years have been generic in nature, e.g. Competency Based Training, Flexible Delivery, Training Package Implementation etc., and had done little to add to the quality of teacher delivery in specific areas of expertise. One teacher noted that the new system required a total re-alignment of teaching skills, and the staff development that was needed to support delivery didn’t happen.

Another of the participants commented that from her perspective an important professional development driver which has been lost in the devolution to Institutes is state-wide networking. She misses the ‘strong connections with other people around the State who have enthusiasm and passion for their work.’ In support of this another teacher commented that it was difficult being the sole full-time teacher in his area in the Institute. He reflected on the value of state wide collegiate professional development activities he once had the opportunity to participate in, and commented that: ‘It’s very important for teachers not to feel professionally isolated.’ Another participant commented that from his perception the ‘level of professional development had dropped over the last nine years he’s been with TAFE.’ Another commented that TAFE needs to do more than provide ‘lip service’ to training.

PD was seen to be more effective when teachers decided themselves what they needed and were in charge of their own direction, in contrast to some activities where the institute decided what people needed. Several teachers expressed the view that professional development activities need to be owned and managed by teachers themselves. One of the participants advocated that TAFE needs to: ‘Give more recognition to professionalism. They could say: “Tell us what you need”. “Tell us how you’d like to do it.” Not just “You must be doing all right because we don’t hear of any problems”’. In support of this, another teacher identified that her Learnscope group is effective because the teachers themselves decided what they needed: ‘They’re in charge of their own direction’.

One of the more professionally isolated teachers interviewed noted that this was the first chance in years that he’d had to talk with anyone about being a teacher and he valued the opportunity very highly.

When asked to predict the nature of VET teaching in the future (over the next 5–10 years), participants identified a range of developments. Some of these included: a sharp rise in e-learning and other flexible modes; more work based learning; less face to face teaching but more learning support; more partnerships (with schools, universities and industry); less training for traditional jobs as these disappear; more economic rationalism; and acceptance of lifelong learning. Most of these trends have been evident for some time. It was interesting however to note that teachers also took the opportunity to focus on the social dimension of learning: of the relationship between learner and teacher and between learner and learner, irrespective of the medium of delivery. Design and delivery of
professional development needs to reflect both changing modes of educational delivery and the centrality of learning as a social activity. Expert teachers have the skills and knowledge to orchestrate a positive learning environment whether in a classroom, workplace or learning centre. We need more research to identify the ways in which these attributes can be effectively translated into the online environment.

5.5.5 From novice to expert

When asked about the transition from novice to expert, all the teachers interviewed were very hesitant in considering themselves expert ... confident maybe, but certainly not expert. An experienced child studies teacher commented that it was only over the last year or two that it dawned on her how much she knew about her industry and teaching. Another trades teacher acknowledged that he had only started to feel confident in the last two or three years – and that his confidence had developed along with broader knowledge of his subject area which arose from reading and reflecting on practice. A communications teacher referred to confidence as ‘compound knowledge’... ‘I’m not just a 10 x 1 year experienced teacher, it’s more like 102.’

For others the transition from novice to a more ‘confident’ teacher arose from their own increasing confidence in dealing with difficult situations; as one teacher put it ‘managing the people stuff’. The teachers talked of their developing ability to work with people, working on establishing a good rapport and an environment of mutual respect. As one teacher stated you are ‘never sure what you are going to face in that classroom – you have no control over learners – you can prepare all you want but you have to rely on ‘survival skills' that are continually developing as you work with different people.’

Working with the learner, the content and the learning process concurrently, came out again and again as the approach adopted by our ‘expert teachers’. The teachers did not segregate the components but worked with all aspects concurrently, relying on their depth of knowledge of content, teaching processes and learner behaviour, and the foundation of theory and experience that enabled the practice of effective and ‘expert’ facilitation to happen.

This was in strong contrast to their perceptions of ‘novice’ delivery. Several participants suggested that novices were always in a rush, often driven by the syllabus and less relaxed and confident in working with the people issues that arise in any learning situation. As one teacher put it: ‘Novices often lack the confidence to step outside the stereotyped role of teacher, that is the need to be didactic, expert ... Novices lapse into the safety of masses of information ... they tend to lecture and the learners are not engaged.’ From another ‘... their assessment practices are often very rigid and not as transparent as they should be. They sometimes back themselves into corners and become defensive when students question their accountability.’ Another commented that ‘more experienced teachers can slow down, confident that a particular skill can always be learned in another situation.’
One of the participants suggested that the transition from novice to expert: '... is about the evolution from self-consciousness to freedom. Beginning teachers tend to be bound by authority, the syllabus and their perception that they have to be the 'expert' while the true experts are more 'flexible and creative.'

On a less positive note, some participants acknowledged that serving time as a teacher does not lead to the transition from novice to expert if the desire to improve practice is not there. One teacher commented that 'some people never move from novice to expert.' He qualified this by suggesting that expert teachers needed to have an 'open mind' and be receptive to new ideas and approaches with an innate willingness to always want to improve - and noted that 'some teachers just don't have the temperament'.

In summary, while the importance of theoretical knowledge as a foundation for teacher development was acknowledged by many of the teachers interviewed, a stronger emphasis was placed on teaching experience and the lessons learned through their own practice.

Observing best practice, reflecting on practice, mentoring, regular evaluation and appropriate professional development were identified as the key elements in supporting the development of professional confidence which had enabled the research participants to move from 'novice' to 'expert'.

At this stage of their careers many of the teachers interviewed were seeking professional development opportunities which supported their unique professional needs. They have a need to identify and structure opportunities which will help them maintain currency, motivation and teaching excellence ... and while many take on this challenge independently, they would welcome more opportunity to 'check in' with one another and work with like minded colleagues to maintain and further teaching excellence.
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