A case study exploring the experiences of teachers in developing confidence in their teaching skills and the role that continuing Professional Development has played in the acquisition of this confidence. What has worked for them and why?

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Abstract

Australia is looking for a model of Vocational Education and Training (VET) teacher development which ensures that there are sufficient people with a sound industry background willing to teach in the VET sector, who can deliver professional teaching to a large variety of students. The problem arises around how we can ensure that VET teachers develop their skills and knowledge further in order to be able to take on more responsibilities and develop their professionalism. In Australia the provision of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) to VET sector teachers has never been addressed in a cohesive manner. A Case Study approach was used to examine how VET teachers have developed their confidence in their professional teaching skills, how they have felt about this development pathway and whether the available professional development options have been adequate. This study focussed on teachers in rural areas. This group are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to any type of higher level teacher training or informal CPD. It considers how these teachers felt about their initial qualification and the reasons for further formal study or continuing to develop their teaching through ongoing professional development.

Findings:

- VET teachers at a Victorian rural campus of TAFE found Cert IV to be suitable beginning level qualification; however the delivery of that qualification by the TAFE sector was inadequate to fully prepare teachers for the start of their teaching career.
- Delivery of this qualification should be improved and a mentoring system for beginning teachers implemented.
- CPD which is structured to build teacher skills and workforce capability and is recognised as building professionalism may create incentive and guidance for teachers to build their skills and confidence.
- The VET workforce’s capability would be continually enhanced if such a career structure could be provided as it would contribute to supporting the growth of the sector and provide a career structure which recognises the professionalism of Vet teachers. This recognition would in turn encourage recruitment of teachers from industry.

Introduction

Well trained and professional teachers maximise student outcomes. This case study referred to both overseas and Australian experiences and insights into teacher qualifications in the VET sector. While each country follows its own model, all agree that the professionalism of VET teachers need to be recognised. This helps to ensure that: the status of training in the sector is maintained, it is recognised that training is well thought out and skilfully delivered and there are sufficient numbers of industry experienced people attracted to teach in this sector.
In order for Australian industry to compete in a world market, the skill levels in the population must increase. The Council of Australian Governments has set a target to halve the proportion of Australians aged between 20 to 64 years without a Certificate III qualification by 2020. The Bradley Review (2008) confirmed this and recommended that skills training at tertiary level be increased at the diploma and advanced diploma, as well as at degree level.

Clayton et.al. (2010) concluded that although there are gaps in the Certificate IV level teaching qualification its success as an entry level qualification depends largely on how well it is delivered and on the support that the beginning teachers receive as they start their teaching careers. If delivery is customised to the particular needs of the teachers the Certificate IV provides a firm foundation on which novice teachers can build.

The problem arises around how we can ensure that VET teachers develop their skills and knowledge further in order to be able to take on more responsibilities and develop their professionalism. (Wheelahan & Curtin, 2010)

In Australia the provision of CPD to VET sector teachers has never been addressed in a cohesive manner by government or individual VET organisations. There needs to be a variety of CPD opportunities available as the skills required by teachers will vary depending on the stage of their career, their aspirations and the context within which they operate. (Guthrie, 2010a). This is a particularly acute issue in rural areas.

There is no arguing with the skills and knowledge development which occur through high level formal study. However there are doubts about the feasibility of all teachers in the VET sector gaining this level of formal qualification, or of the practicality of making this level of qualification requisite to teaching in the VET sector. If formal higher level qualifications are not the only option then how will we ensure that Australian VET teachers continue to develop their skills and remain responsive to the changing needs of VET training?

Teachers in rural areas are particularly disadvantaged in terms of access to any type of higher level teacher training or informal CPD. The study reviews a range of CPD options.

My aim was to gain insight into how well these teachers felt that their initial qualification prepared them for VET teaching, and the reasons for their decisions about either gaining a further qualification or continuing to develop their teaching through ongoing professional development. In this way the data has been used to contribute to the interrogation of this theoretical framework as discussed in the literature.

**Literature review**

**Introduction**

The VET sector in Australia is charged with ‘building human capital by inspiring, stimulating and enriching learners from all segments of the community as well as assist the workforce to acquire the skills needed by the economy and also contribute to social inclusion and civic participation.’ (Productivity Commission, 2011, p. XXIX). The sector is also under particular pressure to provide training which is responsive to economic needs.

The Bradley review (2008) identified that Australia must produce a greater proportion of its population with tertiary skill levels than ever before in order for Australia to be competitive in the world markets. Although it is widely agreed that good teachers facilitate good student outcomes, there is no widespread agreement about how to train good teachers and how to maintain the level of knowledge and skills which are required to help teachers be ‘good’. Recently there has been pressure on teachers and trainers to justify their teaching credentials. Ten years ago there was much more emphasis on current industry knowledge and
industry qualification than there was on teaching qualifications. (Guthrie, 2010b). There is still an emphasis on maintaining industry currency and this leads to some confusion about the primary identity of VET teachers. Are they industry professionals who teach or are they professional teachers who teach industry skills? The VET teacher has to be responsive to a changing educational environment as well as keep their industry knowledge current.

There is no one model of a VET sector teacher/trainer. Training is delivered across a range of competency levels and fields within very different contexts to students with many different abilities. For the purposes of this project I am referring to all people whose primary responsibility is in the teaching and assessment of vocational studies as a teacher.

**Australian experiences**

In the early 1990’s it was proposed that the model of TAFE teacher training be changed to a period of initial teacher induction which developed the basic teaching skills, followed by a period of alternating teacher training and teaching. There was disagreement between employers and teacher unions about the initial VET teacher qualification. (Guthrie, 2010b)

The other consideration, which is still relevant, was that VET teachers are valued for their vocational competence and their industry experience. Hence the people entering the VET system as trainee teachers have wide and varying backgrounds, a wide variety of skills and aptitude and a range of attitudes and aptitude about and for university level study.

A shift to a competency based system across all training sectors put all TAFE teachers into one category. The same emphasis was now placed on practical skills whether the training was for certificate level two or five. Whilst teachers had to have industry experience, most VET training has been and is presently conducted in an educational institution and the outcomes expected of people attending these institutions has traditionally been broader. ‘There is an expectation of not simply developing the skills required for current employment but also skills, knowledge and attitudes that provide opportunities for personal and career development over a lifetime’ (Roberstson, 2008a, p. 4)

In 1998 the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA 1998) described a ‘shift from the ‘training’ to the ‘educational culture’. It referred to lifelong learning, and argued that TAFE is ‘central to the national VET sector’ and addressed key competencies as well as vocational skills, incorporated language, literacy and numeracy skills and argued for seamless post-compulsory pathways.’ (Ryan, 2011, p. 14) This shift put more emphasis onto the pedagogic skills of the VET teacher and a broader range of effective teaching skills to cope with a range of student abilities and learning styles and address issues that impact on a student’s learning. These changes precipitated the development of new standards for workplace trainers and assessors. The Certificate IV became the required teaching standard for VET teachers as it was mandated in the Australian Quality Framework (AQTF) guidelines. (Guthrie, 2010b)

This meant that it became the de-facto requirement rather than VET teaching qualifications at higher levels. This was reflected in the upgrade of BSZ to Cert IV in Training and Assessment (Cert IV TAA) in 2004 and the Cert IV in Training and Education (Cert IV TAE) in 2010.

**VET teaching roles and professionalism**

All versions of the Certificate IV level teaching qualification have met with similar criticism, that at this level there is not enough underpinning teaching and learning theory to enable the novice teacher to develop their teaching practice to the expert level, including transferring their skills to more complex environments. Robertson (2008a) concluded that; ‘the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment may provide the opportunity to develop the applied skills of a novice but not expert teacher. If the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment is seen as initial training to provide teachers with some basic level skills to teach in a supported environment
then it may constitute a useful prelude to further education of a more substantial nature.’ (p. 19)

In contrast a report by Clayton, Meyers, Bateman, & Bluer (2010) found that although there were gaps in the training ‘after six months of experience in the field, the confidence levels of a number of the certificate IV graduates interviewed had either been maintained at a similar level or further improved’. Some had gone on to further professional development activities. These teachers knew they had a lot more to learn and many had the ‘support of mentors, supervisors and experienced peers or were involved in communities of practice’ (p.33).

Clayton et.al. (2010) conclude that although there are gaps in the Certificate IV its success as an entry level qualification depends largely on how well it is delivered and on the support that the beginning teachers receive as they start their teaching careers. If the delivery can be customised to be sympathetic to the particular needs of the teachers and there is adequate time for self reflection, practice and discussion with peers during the initial training and ongoing professional development, the report concludes that the Certificate IV provides a firm foundation on which novice teachers can build.

Recently the Productivity Commission report (April 2011) into the Vocational and Education workforce found that ‘The minimum teaching qualification provides good capability’ (Finding 10.1 p LI) It concludes that the Certificate IV in TAA, when well taught, is an appropriate minimum qualification for the development of essential foundation competencies for VET practitioners working within Enterprise Registered Training Organisations’ (Productivity Commission, 2011 p LI). The Commission also recommends that there should be amendments made to the Cert IV TAE to increase the requirement for planning, organising and delivering group based learning (recommendation 10.7) and so that it ‘more completely covers the diversity of roles within the VET workforce, and reflects a full capability framework for the workforce.’ (Recommendation 10.10 p LV)

The skills which VET teachers need to creatively and competently deliver training to their students can be gained in a variety of ways. The problem is how can to ensure that VET teachers develop their skills and knowledge further to develop their professionalism. (Wheelahan & Curtin, 2010) The professional proficiency of experienced VET teachers also needs to be acknowledged by their employers and the community.

To professionalise VET teaching there needs to be support and recognition through the teaching award, which would have funding consequences for government and require the support of RTOs. The Australian Council of Deans of Education supports this. Their submission argues that the skills gained through study at degree level are needed by the VET sector and that these higher level skills cannot be gained without completing a formal qualification. The ‘added value’ gained by participants in degree programs are summarised as;

‘The university qualification offers depth of understanding...A university qualification transforms my practice...A university qualification allows us to engage with complex work roles and initiate improvement.’ (The Australian Council of Deans of Education (ACDE), March 7, 2011, pp. 4-5)

The Victorian Context

The Victorian teacher’s union has negotiated an award with a tiered approach. Upon completion of Certificate IV pay levels increase annually to a certain level. Beyond this a diploma or above is required to continue the increments. The current diploma includes a supervised teaching practicum. Therefore the alternate Diploma of VET Practice which is a Victorian qualification is preferred. The union encourages teachers to continue onto a degree
in VET teaching however currently there is no financial incentive in the award for this. (Forward, 2004) (Forward, 2010) VET teachers range from highly academically qualified teachers teaching at Diploma level and higher to those who come from an industry background and teach apprentices and trade level competencies in a very practical way. There is a long way to go before there is one prescribed formal teaching qualification which can be accessible and relevant to all VET teachers. ‘At the end of the day, the diversity of potential qualifications and skills required in VET is a refelction of the diversity of the sector’s mission and the variety of the interest groups and clients it supports. Thus multiple and ‘fit for purpose ‘ entry points ( with associated training solutions and qualifications) may be more appropriate. If so, what then becomes important is facilitating career and qualification pathways and providing readily available opportunities to build a rewarding career, as well as acquire additional skills, knowledge and formal qualifications , if appropriate.’ (Guthrie , 2010b, p. 11)

Continuing professional development options

The provision of continuing professional development (CPD) to VET sector teachers has never been addressed in a cohesive manner in Australia. Wheelahan & Curtin (2010) conclude that ‘the nature of CPD is as important to the quality of the VET teaching workforce as are qualifications.’ (p.8) And they recommend that, ‘Australia’s model of CPD should be broadened to include a greater focus on teacher’s specialisms, as well as providing teachers with access to generic CPD.’ (p.8)

There needs to be a variety of CPD opportunities available as the skills required by teachers will vary depending on the stage of their career, their aspirations and the context within which they operate. (Guthrie, 2010a)

The Productivity Commission (2011) calls for ‘Better coordination, targeting and support of professional development’ (Recommendation 10.8 pLVl). They recomend that States collaborate to assess the funding requirements for CPD in their VET workforces and ‘Registered Training Organisations should identify capability needs within their own workforces and target funding accordingly’ (p LVl)

The most recently published data shows that the majority of practitioners know that they have to keep updating their skills and that they need to engage in regular professional development, but that there is a lack of CPD opportunities, with only 55% of their CPD needs being met. (Mitchell & Ward, 2010, p. 17) Mitchell & Ward (2010) summarise: ‘It is a picture of a dedicated group of educational professionals who are not being offered sufficient opportunities to develop their skill levels in ways that meet their professional requirements.’ (p.17) It is widely understood that CPD offered to teachers should be practical and applicable to the context that the teacher works in. Teachers must be able to explore their understanding of teaching and learning with their peers-experimenting, reflecting, discussing, and assessing their efforts as part of their daily routine. (Sturko & Gregson, 2009)

Mitchell & Ward (2010) propose a model identifying stages of development for VET teachers:

1. The foundation VET practitioner
2. The Specialist VET Practitioner
3. The Advanced VET practitioner

The skills which teachers require in order to move through these levels have been defined by Mitchell and Ward (2010) and this allows the development of a structured professional development program which VET teachers can access as appropriate. This ‘research encourages practitioners to review their current skill levels, their needs for skills development
and their possible development pathway within VET—from foundation to advanced.’ (Mitchell & Ward, 2010, p. 32)

In Victoria there are numerous options for CPD other than ongoing formal studies with university. The TAFE Development Centre (TDC) has consistently offered a range of CPD opportunities. CPD is provided for different target groups of teachers from those who are beginning to those who are moving into management roles.

Another way that skills can be developed is by teachers learning in their workplace with colleagues. There has been much research carried out which examines learning in the workplace and through forming communities of practice with colleagues. This has been shown to be an effective way that teachers learn by reflecting on their practice and through discussion with more experienced teachers they are able to develop skills. (McDonald, 2008)

The VET system originated from the premise that it is best to learn ‘by doing’. There is some argument that this way of learning applies to teaching as well. ‘Situated learning theory argues that knowledge and skills are developed by ‘doing’ in a range of skills and contexts or communities of practice, where each time the learner creates new knowledge.’ (Gonzi, 2004, p. 29) Smith & Keating (2003) suggest numerous ways that this can be achieved by teachers. However teachers need support to put these options into practice. They need to be given time and structure for these options to be consistently used to facilitate CPD.

This option would obviously be beneficial to the development of teaching skills however it does not provide formal recognition of the skills and consequently does not contribute to recognition of the ‘professionalism’ of VET teachers.

In summary

There is no disputing the skills and knowledge development which occur through high level formal study. However there are still many doubts about the feasibility of all teachers in the VET sector gaining this level of formal qualification, or of the practicality of making this level of qualification a pre-requisite to teaching in the VET sector.

Currently the Cert IV level teaching qualification is recognised as an acceptable starting level qualification for VET teachers in Australia as long as the delivery is well suited to the context and that the beginning teacher has some form of mentoring by more experienced colleagues. This is the model which is being pursued in England with varying success. The research has made some suggestions about how this process could be enhanced which in turn could be incorporated into the Australian context.

However there needs to be a range of methods by which teachers can be continually upgrading their skills. The Mitchell and Ward model of CPD allows teachers to progress through levels of professional development which reflects their experience and interests. In Victoria CPD offered through the TDC reflects the different levels of experience and interest which teachers progress through. At this time there is no formal recognition by the Teachers Award of the CPD which teachers attend and there is no requirement to attend a certain amount of CPD in a year. The Award does however recognise a Diploma of VET Practice by allowing teachers to progress up the pay scale.

There are other less formal ways of delivering CPD to teachers through Communities of Practice (COP). This allows teachers to discuss and reflect on their teaching practice and provides a forum for the sharing of new ideas or pedagogic knowledge which members of the group may be using. Again there is no formal recognition of this method of CPD.

If formal higher level qualifications are not the only option of up skilling and recognising the professionalism of VET teachers and CPD is not provided in a cohesive programme, then how
will we ensure that Australian VET teachers continue to develop their skills and remain responsive to the changing needs of VET training?
This project seeks to contribute to this debate.

**Research method**

A Case Study research design was used as it allowed an in depth study of one aspect of a problem or area of investigation. Five experienced teachers who work at a rural campus of TAFE were approached. There was a mix of genders, age and teaching areas. Interview questions were based around themes to investigate attitudes and feelings around these themes. The interviews were carried out as semi-structured interviews. Discretion was used to follow up or clarify points which were made by the interviewee. The findings from a case study cannot be generalised to all teachers, but can be co-related to other teachers’ experiences.

**Findings and discussion**

*Experience of teachers around gaining initial teaching qualification*

All the participants obtained their initial VET teaching qualification by a mix of attending classes and RPL. While RPL was possible in their cases it is not a good method of inducting or teaching new teachers how to teach. Joe and Andrew who had no teaching background, did not feel prepared for teaching. They received no ongoing mentoring and little formal instruction about teaching methods or pedagogic theory. They desire more teaching theory knowledge even now, having gained considerable experience as teachers.

Tom, Bill and Jane had previous experience as trainers and Tom and Jane had been extensively mentored. In effect they had been taught to teach to a certain level before they started their VET teaching career. These three all said that they felt confident with their teaching when they first started. Tom and Bill remained confident and did not feel the need for further teaching qualifications. Jane has gone onto higher level qualifications and she commented that in retrospect ‘she was probably too confident.’ The experiences of these teachers supports the literature in that the Cert IV appears to be a suitable initial qualification initially if it is well delivered and there is ongoing support in the form of a mentoring program.

*Teacher’s perception of need for higher level qualifications in teaching*

Jane, Andrew and Joe have completed higher qualifications than Cert IV. Joe has a Diploma of VET teaching Practice and Jane and Andrew have completed the Degree in VET teaching.

*Diploma of VET Practice*

Joe stated that he only completed the Diploma because it meant he could progress up the pay scale. He completed the course through a combination of classes and RPL. He did not feel that he learnt anything much about ‘what he wanted to know which is learning how to teach.’ This experience again highlights the need for good delivery of teaching qualifications within the VET sector. This could have been a useful experience for him if he had been exposed to innovative teaching ideas and good applicable pedagogic knowledge.

*Degree in VET teaching*

Jane and Andrew both completed the Associate degree in VET teaching then continued onto the degree. Both said that their motivation was a combination of wanting to learn more about teaching and the incentive of progressing up the pay scale. A higher pay level is important as there is a substantial commitment of time and money to complete higher level qualifications.
In rural areas university study is mostly only available by distance delivery. This requires a large amount of self motivation as often the work is completed in isolation. Jane and Andrew must have been motivated by more than the pay as a diploma level is the highest mandated level of VET teaching qualification, yet they completed extra years of study for the degree. Jane felt that she learnt a lot from her study and feels much more aware of teaching theory. She said ‘the degree showed me potential teaching options and has given me the skills to explore and research options.’ Her comments indicate that the degree level study has given her a greater insight and the confidence to research and explore teaching options. These comments support the arguments that were made by the Council of Deans quoted earlier. Andrew feels differently. He is still searching for guidance and was dissatisfied with the level of interaction and guidance he received whilst undertaking the degree. This may be a result of the distance study mode, in that he could not attend classes and participate in the discussions and interaction with other lecturers and other students. He still lacks confidence and is looking for PD which is about different ways of approaching teaching delivery. The different experience of these two teachers probably reflects their different learning styles, and illustrates that the limitations of the distance study mode has more impact on some people than others. The opportunity for rural VET teachers to attend CPD on relevant topics or which can be counted towards a formal qualification would go some way towards improving the experience of these teachers. Andrew, particularly, may also have benefitted from a COP where he could have discussed and reflected on pedagogic theory.

Victorian VET teacher’s award

The Victorian VET Teachers award provides incentive for gaining the diploma level. However any higher qualification does not guarantee progression up the pay scale. This however does occur as the teacher becomes more experienced. In its present form the VET Teachers Award does not enhance the perception of the public about the professionalism of VET teachers as there is no recognition of Degree level qualifications or of attendance at CPD. There is a real dilemma faced by advocates of compulsory higher level qualifications as VET teachers are valued for their industry expertise which means skilled trades people need to be recruited as teachers. The two participants in this project who have the strongest trade backgrounds and teach at trade level are Tom and Bill. Neither was interested in gaining a higher level qualification and did not perceive any problems with their teaching. Both explained that for the type of teaching they do, they felt that they had the industry knowledge and a good general experience which allowed them to teach effectively. This again indicates the need for different levels of either qualification or recognition within the VET teaching profession.

Teacher’s feelings about the professional development options which have been available.

The teachers who were most confident about their teaching when they first started had some previous experience with training. Joe and Andrew felt the least confident and both felt that they were given minimal guidance when they first started. This indicates that a mentoring process would be helpful for new teachers. Both Tom and Jane had been mentored as they gained their initial teaching experience and Joe mentioned that a mentor would have been helpful when he first started teaching. The English experience can inform our implementation of a mentoring system. Orr and Simmonds (2011) found that although a beginning teacher programme was implemented, the quality of the programme varied across different institutes. The access to mentors, time off for study and the quality of the teaching programme varied greatly. If a similar model was to be introduced in Australia the experience of the English Further Education sector should be taken into account.

Access to Continuing Professional Development
Although Joe does not think a degree can teach him what he wants to know he is talking about much the same issues as Jane and Andrew. He is interested in attending CPD which addresses the theory of teaching and learning and having it applied to a VET context. He talks about discussing teaching methods and ways of presenting information with other teachers. He also talked about having the chance to observe other teachers.

Jane, Andrew and Joe commented that PD run by the TDC which they had attended had been relevant and useful. One of the benefits mentioned was the opportunity to gain new ideas and interact with other teachers from outside their normal group. As Jane said it provided ‘an extra spark of ideas.’ Joe particularly commented on one PD session that ‘gave me new ideas to apply to delivery. The workshop presented something which I could use in the classroom, and I got a lot out of that. It made me think about new ways of delivering.’

**How teachers perceive their ongoing professional development needs**

Four participants were positive about CPD. All were willing to travel and staying away overnight was not an impediment, however lack of time was cited as a barrier. It was also noted that there is no structured PD program to help teachers complete a defined skill set.

**Issues around Continuing professional Development**

Jane and Andrew commented that study for the degree had taken up any extra time that they would have had for PD in the last few years. Joe talked about wanting PD which would give him skills he could use in the classroom, but had only attended a couple of PD sessions which were run locally. All commented that there is very little time to attend PD.

**Conclusion**

The Mitchell model of CPD advocates a similar model to the Victorian TDC, however it has a more targeted and defined approach. Their model would encourage teachers to progress through the levels as they gained more experience and as they felt they needed it. The progress through the levels could be recognised by progression up the pay scale. Wheelehan and Moodie (2011) support this model. Whilst acknowledging that there are different skill levels ‘the trajectory needs to be to support all teachers and trainers who have full teaching and training responsibilities to progress to higher level qualifications. These qualifications need to be designed to be flexible...have multiple entry and exit points, and... be integrated with CPD so that this can count towards qualifications.’ (p.43)

The findings of this research project have supported much of the previous research which has been carried out in Australia and overseas. VET teachers who teach at a rural campus in Victoria have found Cert IV to be suitable beginning level qualification; however the delivery of that qualification by the TAFE sector was inadequate to fully prepare teachers for the start of their teaching career. Teachers who were mentored during their initial teacher training were more confident about their teaching than those who had no formal support. The desire amongst teachers to pursue higher level qualifications is variable; however the incentive of higher pay and greater professional recognition is effective in giving teachers incentive to complete higher level training. The teachers generally could not identify future CPD needs and this may reflect the lack of career structure which presently exists. CPD which is structured to build teacher skills and workforce capability and is recognised as building professionalism may create incentive and guidance for teachers to build their skills and confidence. Most teachers were positive about attending CPD as long as it was relevant to them and applicable to a VET sector context. The restructuring of the VET teacher’s professional award to reflect the increasing professionalism which occurs with training and over time would provide incentive
and structure to teachers continuing their professional development. The VET workforce’s capability would be continually enhanced if such a career structure could be provided.

References
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