Integrating LLN into VET Practice Project – a Community of Practice Approach

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Abstract

International surveys conducted by the OECD identified that the majority of Australians do not have the language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills needed to function effectively in modern society (ABS, 2008, 2013). Poor LLN skills are significant barriers for learners accessing and completing training, particularly apprentices and groups experiencing disadvantage (Volkoff et al., 2008). Underperforming school students and older adults with incomplete schooling or poor literacy and numeracy skills gravitate towards the VET sector, which in turn creates challenges for VET practitioners and registered training organisations (RTOs) (Teese & Walstab, 2009).

The Queensland VET Development Centre (QVDC) has been at the forefront of initiatives to develop the skills of VET educators to address the challenges faced by learners who have poor LLN skills. A key component of the Queensland VET Continuous Professional Learning Strategy: 2012-2015 is ‘embedding foundation skills (LLN and Employability Skills) into core practice’. The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (NFSS) echoes this same identified need to build foundation skills expertise among VET practitioners (SCOTESE, 2012).

The QVDC delivered a series of workshops to develop VET educators’ awareness of the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and how it can be effectively utilised in teaching, learning and assessment (TLA). Following these workshops participants were invited to form a leading practice group. Funded through the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) program, the action learning projects provided VET educators with the opportunity to increase their confidence and capability to address the LLN skills of their learners through the application of individual projects. Through expert facilitation, the workshops are designed to link with the participants’ fields of interest. These projects promote strategic change including resource development, professional learning, peer-to-peer learning and communities of practice. This initiative documents individual projects and disseminates the lessons learned to the wider VET community. The intent of this paper is to provide a progressive report of the program for interested parties.

Background

International surveys identified that a significant proportion of the Australian population does not have the literacy or numeracy levels required to function effectively in modern society
The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)'s Programme for International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) showed that 7.4 million Australians (45% of the population) and 8.9 million Australians (55% of the population) scored below the functional literacy and numeracy levels respectively (ABS, 2013). This is similar to, and shows no improvement from, previous surveys in the mid-1990s and mid-2000s (ABS, 2013).

Poor language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills are shown to directly impact on skill development and productivity (Shomos, 2010; Skills Australia, 2010) and on learners’ ability to progress in their vocational education and training (VET) (Volkoff, Clarke & Walstab, 2008). Teese and Walstab (2009) assert that underperforming school students and older adults with incomplete schooling or poor literacy and numeracy skills gravitate towards the VET sector thus creating greater challenges for VET practitioners and registered training organisations (RTOs).

Registered training organisations (RTOs) employ a range of strategies to address LLN issues with their learners. These include pre-assessment and screening of learners, universal provision of literacy and numeracy support, staff development, contextualisation of literacy and numeracy support within vocational areas and targeted concurrent or team teaching (Volkoff, Clarke, & Walstab, 2008). Contextualisation of LLN skills provides the opportunity for learners to engage in learning when they recognise the relevance of LLN to their vocational study and work (BIS, 2011; Casey et al, 2006; Marr & Hagston, 2007; Perkins, 2009). The 'team-teaching' approach where a technical expert shares a student cohort with a LLN specialist (Casey et al, 2006; McKenna & Fitzpatrick, 2005; Wickert, Searle, Marr & Johnston, 2008) has also been used in some instances. This, however, has some obvious limitations; it is more resource intensive, does not fit most apprenticeship training funding models and it relies upon the availability of LLN specialists who are currently in short supply and ageing (Mackay, Burgoyne, Warwick & Cipollone, 2006; Misko, 2005; Perkins, 2009). In response to this identified shortage of LLN specialists, a range of government initiatives aimed at building capacity through developing the capability of VET practitioners (DIISTRE, n.d.) have been developed.

Building the capability of VET practitioners to effectively address the poor literacy and numeracy skills of learners will enable a workforce with greater capacity to not only identify potential issues but to also address them accordingly. It is generally accepted that VET educators have not, in the past, been expected to be skilled to recognise and resolve deficit areas of literacy and numeracy. Mackay et al (2006) found that vocational trainers had received little, if any, training in how to address literacy and numeracy issues. This assumption is supported in existing literature on the focal areas of capability building of VET practitioners, through the scant attention given to addressing LLN skills of learners (Dickie et al, 2004; Guthrie & Clayton, 2010; Harris et al, 2001; Reed et al, 2003).

The effectiveness of capability building programs in developing the LLN skills or confidence of VET educators is inconclusive. Falk and Millar (2000) reported variable outcomes of capability programs due to a range of factors: a lack of clarity of the specific literacy and numeracy requirements in some training packages, and a tendency of some trainers to overlook literacy and numeracy as underpinning skills because of lack of knowledge and
expertise on their part and a lack of resources to articulate the literacy and numeracy requirements of training packages. In addition, the NCVER (2006) identified a range of impediments for VET practitioners taking up continuous professional learning opportunities in LLN including demands on teaching priorities, prioritisation of LLN professional development not seen as a priority, time requirements, funding constraints, practitioner employment status, and access to resources including support.

The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults
The National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (NFSS) has been hailed as the most significant LLN initiative in the past twenty years in Australia (ACER, 2012). Whereas Australia was regarded as a leader in LLN in the 1980s, it has been criticised for not doing enough in recent years (McKenna & Fitzpatrick, 2005; NALA, 2011; Perkins, 2009; Skills Australia, 2010; University of Ballarat, 2009). The NFSS was launched by Australian governments in late 2012 as a ten-year strategic initiative to develop and maintain the foundation skills (literacy and numeracy and employability skills) of adults. Its target is that by 2022, two thirds of working age Australians will have literacy and numeracy skills at Level 3 or above (SCOTESE, 2012). As part of this strategy, the NFSS supports the: ‘Building the capacity of the education and training workforces to deliver foundation skills… supporting vocational trainers to better integrate foundation skills with vocational training’ (SCOTESE, 2012, p 3). The Strategy complements specific government initiatives including the development of resources such as the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF).

The Australian Core Skills Framework
The Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) was developed in 2008 based upon the 1995 National Reporting System. Whilst it was designed primarily for use by LLN specialists (DEEWR, 2008), QVDC (2011) identified the potential for adoption by VET practitioners as it is a systematic and detailed tool for describing and measuring LLN skills (DEEWR, 2008, p. 2). The ACSF provides a useful resource for VET practitioners as it is underpinned by a broad range of theoretical understandings around adult learning, language, literacy and mathematical development. In fact, the 2012 updated version of the ACSF has a much stronger focus on VET; it states that it can be used for a range of purposes including tailoring training, teaching, learning and assessment and to assist VET practitioners to provide specific feedback on performance (DEEWR, 2012). The ACSF offers a common language and precepts to promote a common ground for dialogue between VET educators and LLN specialists.

Identifying the need
In 2010, the Queensland VET Development Centre (QVDC) conducted two symposia canvassing the impact of poor language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills on the VET sector, particularly on the uptake and completion of qualifications (QVDC, 2011). This resulted in the development of a professional learning program for the integration of LLN into VET practice. A series of workshops for VET educators that focused on the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) were the precursor of a dedicated program to support educators attain improved knowledge and skills related to LLN.. Knowledge of the ACSF was essential to aid VET practitioners in the integration of LLN into VET practice. Aimed at
developing critical awareness and building the confidence and skills of VET educators, these workshops addressed issues arising from learners with poor LLN skills.

The QVDC gathered data from these workshops on the issues faced by VET practitioners with respect to poor LLN of learners. By the completion of the workshops participants were well positioned to indicate their intention to modify their teaching, learning and assessment practices that incorporated their newly-gained knowledge. Respondents cited the following areas for development:

- Increase their awareness of LLN issues
- Modify TLA resources for LLN
- Change their teaching pedagogy
- Conduct assessment of the LLN skills of their learners
- Undertake Continuous Professional Learning
- Increase collaboration with LLN specialists; and LLN specialists with VET educators
- Canvass team-teaching approaches

Following the success of this initial workshop, participants were invited to become part of a continuing professional learning (CPL) group, to implement relevant projects focused on integrating LLN into VET practice as a learning community (Wenger, Trayner & de Laat, 2011).

The Integrating LLN into VET Practice (ILVP) program's objective provides a sustainable model for strategic change in the VET industry (at the RTO level) with the overarching goal of providing enhanced LLN outcomes for trainees and apprentices, in the workplace, and across a range of industry areas. Professional learning workshops utilise an action learning and collaboration model. A cohort of VET educators formulates best practice models as exemplars for other VET educators. Stories from the cohort group detail their experiences and offer insights for dealing with specific challenges. These stories promote peer-to-peer learning opportunities by disseminating these lessons to their peers and the wider VET sector.

Alignment with the national agenda

The Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL) through the Commonwealth Department of Industry, Innovation, Science, Research and Tertiary Education (DIISRTE) funded the project. The program supports key national strategies and agreements related to the embedding of LLN in VET such as the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (SCOTESE, 2012), the Equity Blueprint (NVEAC, 2011), the VET Workforce Report (Australian Productivity Commission, 2011), Skills for Prosperity - A Roadmap for VET (Skills Australia, 2010), the National Agreement for Skills and Workforce Development (COAG, 2012) and the National Partnership on Skills Reform (2012).

The project governance and objectives

A National Project Reference Group (NPRG) of accomplished LLN and VET leaders guides the program and provides clear direction and expertise to ensure best practice in the program. The project involves a strategy and model for change through professional learning in communities of practice by focusing on skills development and action learning projects. It seeks to strengthen the workforce that delivers foundation skills training, and increase the
VET industry's responsiveness to the LLN needs of learners. The model focuses on embedding LLN into workplace tasks through VET programs and provides the opportunity to re-engage with disengaged learners, by providing them with the requisite LLN skills for their chosen occupations. The cohort's action learning projects will address issues relevant to RTO, learner and industry. They will guide the individual's future continuous professional learning.

The project

Participants’ projects are based on the guiding principles of being:

- Collaborative - between participants, the VET sector, LLN specialists and workplaces
- Achievable - they are succinct projects that can be completed within the timeframe
- Innovative - they address new areas or engage new strategies
- Responsive - they address the needs of learners and industry
- Reflective – they will lead to future innovation and change.

The program consists of a series of six one-day workshops. There are two groups, each of 8-10 individual projects. The first project commences on 16 July 2013 and completes on 12 November 2013. The second project commences on 11 February 2014 and completes on 03 June 2014.

The first two workshops are conducted on concurrent days. During the first two professional learning days, participants scope their individual projects. This provides the context and the achievability of their projects within the timeframe. It is envisaged, and encouraged, that participants will continue on with their projects following the completion of the project. Participants will be encouraged to maintain their membership to the learning community.

On the second day, the participants’ sponsors join the group and they jointly sign-off on the project parameters. This promotes buy-in and support from the workplace.

An online resource to facilitate communication between participants and to access resources is an integral component of the project. In addition, expert advice can be accessed by the participants during the course of the project.

Projects – Group One

Having two groups enables the project to have a strong cross-section representation of stories from the VET sector. Participants are encouraged to submit projects that are relevant to their workplace.

The projects in the first ILVP group cover a range of areas:

- integrating LLN into plumbing vocational training
- team-teaching/collaboration – community services and health, & information technology
- maths and retention in engineering courses
- implementing the Foundation Skills Training Package
- resource development for VET in Schools (VETiS) delivery of the Foundation Skills Training Package
- an integrated CPL program for VETiS teachers (ACSF)
• online resources to support CPL for VET educators (LLN unit)
• LLN assessment of entrants to VET
• LLN support for youth at risk in VET.

Methodology
The program documents the outcomes of the individual projects utilising the most significant change (MSC) methodology of evaluation. This focuses on the changes that have occurred during the course of completing the action learning projects. Unlike traditional monitoring techniques that focus largely on monitoring activities and outputs, MSC methodology focuses on monitoring intermediate outcomes and impact (Davies & Dart, 2004). Important lessons are learned and reported by examining what has changed and how this change has affected stakeholders. The impacts of the lessons learned are maximised by sharing them with a wider audience for comment. Achieved by posting them online and presentations at conferences, seminars and the like, the participants engage through a narrative of experience. This collegiate approach is the intrinsic value of the proposed program. This is essentially the crux of the program: the lessons learned add value to the wider VET community in this crucial, but largely misunderstood area.

Based on the work of Rick Davies and Jess Dart, MSC is a methodology to monitor and evaluate programs, particularly those aimed at generating change. Participants work with stakeholders and beneficiaries to document stories of change that are the consequence of program interventions in domains that are the program’s purposeful focus. The most significant stories are verified, published and shared.

There are many appropriate methodologies for monitoring and evaluating programs. Their effectiveness is partly related to the types of programs they serve. For example, statistical data collection and analysis may be the most effective and efficient methodology for a program with known, homogenous and quantifiable targets, outputs and key performance indicators. Integrating LLN into VET Practice (ILVP) is not such a program.

ILVP participants will develop professional capabilities and apply their knowledge and skills to action learning projects relevant to their industry sector, their RTOs and their learners. Whilst remaining focused on effectively integrating LLN into training and assessment, the projects will also reflect the diversity of the VET sector and its clients. Domains, and significant stories of change, include teaching, learning and assessment design, implementation of new Training Package qualifications, teaching and learning technologies, and articulation pathway barriers.

Participants use reflection, professional conversation and facilitated discussion to propose, monitor, authenticate and evaluate changes prompted by their participation in the program. Individually, and as a group, they generate knowledge, clarify what they are trying to achieve, make judgements and facilitate change.

Through learning about and experiencing MSC, participants will also develop a mastery of the methodology that they can further apply within their own organisations.

Participants become familiar with MSC during their program’s first professional learning days. They are provided with the narrative template that will guide their final change story
submissions. In the following professional learning days, participants are guided through monitoring the program and their participation in it. They will present their authenticated significant change stories to colleagues and stakeholders in the final professional learning day. During this final session, stories are openly shared to provide opportunities for cross collaboration, to evaluate judgements about the impact of the program, and for narrative updates and amendments.

Story narratives are central to the processes of the program, the evaluation of its success and the collection of outcomes and artefacts. They allow participants to focus on intended outcomes; non-evaluation experts to make and contribute judgements, provide evidence of change and even change barriers, and lodge as exemplars in the memories of participants and stakeholders. The stories intentionally encourage the exchange of understandings and ideas, link cause and effect, represent relationships, rank priorities, disclose values, and make sense of a range of sometimes complex and interdependent outcomes.

In MSC, stories are accounts of what has happened in response to questions about significant change. The storytelling has few “rules” but will be guided by a template which structures a beginning, middle and end, and encourages description, interpretation and judgment.

The narratives have most value in the contexts they reflect, in this case, the participants’ RTOs and their client bases. They also hold personal value for the storytellers as evidence of their learnings and their impacts. Continuous program improvement is also facilitated by the collected stories.

The stories are also valuable to the wider VET audience, and so may be shared through publications, research papers, and promotional material. While business details usually accompany the stories, no personal information will be disclosed. Prior participant permissions will be sought.

MSC begins with those responsible for managing, monitoring and evaluating a program, together with their stakeholders, identifying the broad domains of change. Whilst they are not as precisely defined as key performance indicators might be, they are used to distinguish and discriminate between different kinds of change stories. They might include changes in practice or behaviours, even in productivity, or profitability. The domains will be determined by program intentions.

Those most directly involved collect stories and allocate them to domains. Stories are analysed, filtered and reviewed through program or organisational levels and selected for their significance in a systematic and transparent way using shared and recorded criteria relevant to the purpose and to stakeholders.

After verification of the described events, stories are published related to the domains and to the reasons why they are significant. Sometime afterwards, follow-up stories may be sought to capture, document and evaluate longer-term changes.

The technique facilitates program monitoring and evaluation by:

- Focusing on outcomes of change rather than on the management of programs
- Uncovering outcomes not initially specified
- Including learnings that can increase understandings of changes and their significance
- Focusing activities in the most explicitly valued directions
- Facilitating reflection and dialogue
- Providing a methodology for complex programs with multiple aims and stakeholders
- Encouraging the conceptualising and clarifying of program impacts
- Complementing other program planning, monitoring and evaluation methodologies
- Encouraging participant and stakeholder involvement which in turn, promotes dissemination and implementation
- Focusing on the change interventions and their beneficiaries.

MSC may not be the ideal methodology for some organisations and programs including:
- When specific data needs to be generated, interrogated and mined
- Where there is no culture of dialogue and sharing, particularly of negative outcomes
- Where evaluation needs to be fast, and not resource intensive
- Where senior officers are not committed to the process
- Where trust is limited
- Where outcomes are predetermined, obvious and statics are easily collectable.

Davies and Dart (2005) provide ten steps for full implementation of MSC:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. How to start and raise interest</td>
<td>Introducing the stakeholders to MSC and encouraging their interest, commitment and participation</td>
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<td>2. Defining the domains of change</td>
<td>Identifying broad domains with stakeholders which may then become more defined</td>
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<td>3. Defining the reporting period</td>
<td>Deciding on how often and when to monitor changes taking place in these domains</td>
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<td>4. Collecting significant change stories</td>
<td>Collecting stories from those directly involved, prompted by simple guiding questions e.g.: ‘During the last month, in your opinion, what was the most significant change that took place?’</td>
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<td>5. Selecting the most significant of the stories</td>
<td>Analysing and filtering the stories through the levels of authority or hierarchy typically found within an organisation or program. Each level reviews the stories and chooses the most significant account of change within each of the domains. Every time stories are selected, the criteria used to select them are recorded and fed back to all interested stakeholders, so that each subsequent round of story collection and selection is informed by feedback from previous rounds. Each group then sends the selected stories up to the next level of the program hierarchy, and the number of stories is whittled down through a systematic and transparent process. The organisation is effectively recording and adjusting the direction of its attention – and the criteria it uses for valuing the events it sees there.</td>
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<td>Step</td>
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<td>6. Feeding back the results of the selection process</td>
<td>Documenting all stories selected at the uppermost organisational level over a period in each domain of change. The stories are accompanied by the reasons the stories were selected. Program funder or sponsors may be asked to assess the stories in this document and select those that best represent the sort of outcomes they wish to fund. They are also asked to document the reasons for their choice.</td>
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<td>7. Verification of stories</td>
<td>Verifying stories, perhaps including visiting the sites where the described events took place to check that stories have been reported accurately, and to provide an opportunity to gather more detailed information about events seen as especially significant. If conducted some time after the event, a visit also offers a chance to see what has happened since the event was first documented.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Quantification</td>
<td>Quantifying information about programs and/or outcomes relevant to participation and to changes</td>
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<td>9. Secondary analysis and meta-monitoring</td>
<td>Monitoring the methodology itself, which can include looking at who participated and how they affected the contents, and analysing how often different types of changes are reported.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10. Revising the system</td>
<td>Revising the MSC process design to take into account what has been learned as a direct result of using it and from analysing its use.</td>
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(Davies and Dart, 2005, pp 10 – 11)

**Reporting**

The project outcomes will be reported to WELL progressively, and at the conclusion in June 2014. Information on the project will be disseminated through a range of media, including the QVDC website, and presentations at various conferences.
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