Language, literacy and numeracy and vocational education collaboration: enablers and barriers

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Abstract

The introduction of the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment [SCOTSE] 2012) and the Foundation Skills Training Package (FSK) will demand a greater focus on developing language, literacy and numeracy (LLN) skills in all vocational education and training (VET) programs. To achieve this outcome it will be necessary for VET practitioners and language, literacy and numeracy practitioners to work collaboratively, each contributing their particular skills and knowledge. To accomplish this collaboration they will need the appropriate environment, resources, skills and attitudes. But what environment, resources, skills and attitudes will they need? What will be the enablers and barriers to their working together? The Language Literacy and Numeracy Vocational Education and Training Community of Practice (LLN/VET CoP) was created to explore these questions.

The community of practice research project was conducted by Cooperative Learning Limited in 2012 with funding from the New South Wales Department of Education and Communities. Using a combination of online discussions, face-to-face meetings, formal and informal learning, the Language Literacy and Numeracy VET Community of Practice allowed VET and LLN practitioners to share and build their knowledge and skills and to work together to develop materials for the Foundation Skills Training Package. The community of practice successfully modelled a particular type of collaboration involving literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners working together as equal partners in course development. Participants in the community of practice reported a greater awareness of and respect for the skills, knowledge and pedagogy of each other. They identified a range of enablers and barriers to their working together.

Introduction

There are increasing demands for literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners to work collaboratively and yet this is not necessarily a simple process, as each often has different pathways into teaching, different pedagogical knowledge, and possibly different goals for their learners.

The need to work collaboratively is indicated by a number of factors, including the low levels of literacy and numeracy in the Australian workforce (ABS 2007; Australian Industry Group 2010; Innovation & Business Skills Australia 2010; Industry Skills Councils 2010; Skills Australia 2010), the increasing literacy demands of the modern Australian workplace (Australian Industry Group 2010; Industry Skills Councils 2010; National Quality Council 2009; Skills Australia 2010; Shomos 2010; Wheelahan & Moodie 2011), and the introduction of the Foundation Skills Training Package and the National Foundation Skills Strategy (NFSS). The National Foundation Skills Strategy sets a target that
by 2022 at least two-thirds of working-age Australians will have literacy and numeracy skills at Level 3 (Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey scale; ABS 2007) or above. In order to achieve this target it will be necessary to build the capacity of the education and training workforce to deliver foundation skills (Standing Council on Tertiary Education, Skills and Employment 2012).

Black and Yasukawa (2011) suggest that most current models of literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners working together are based on ‘deficit’ approaches, where LLN trainers work with those students who are pre-assessed as lacking in literacy and numeracy skills. In most of these models, the literacy and numeracy trainer is relegated to the role of support teacher. Such deficit models, they explain, contrast with alternatives where teachers work with all VET learners to develop the specific literacies and numeracies required for their chosen vocational field.

Black and Yasukawa call for a new ‘shared delivery’ approach with the potential to challenge both literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners to reconsider their way of teaching. A ‘shared delivery’ approach may take many forms, but essentially involves both trainers having equal status and input into the learning program as well as having the opportunity to influence each other’s pedagogy to better suit the needs of the students. The Language Literacy and Numeracy VET Community of Practice is one such ‘shared delivery’ model, because it involves LLN and VET practitioners working together in the planning stage of the course, developing training and assessment strategies and assessment tools.

The community of practice was designed to trial a shared delivery model, in response to the perceived need for literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners to find an effective way of working collaboratively and to answer the question:

- What are the enablers and barriers to LLN and VET practitioners working together?

Enablers are factors that make the job of working collaboratively easier, while barriers are those factors that make the job more difficult. Enablers and barriers may include such areas as support from management, funding, workplace culture, resources, skills, knowledge and practitioner attitude.

The community of practice gave VET and literacy and numeracy practitioners the opportunity to share their knowledge and skills and to work together. The researcher observed their interactions and drew the participants into reflective discussions about their experiences in the community of practice and what they considered to be the enablers and barriers to their working together.

The community of practice provided professional development for participants, piloted a shared delivery model, developed some useful resources and provided some valuable insight into the enablers and barriers for LLN and VET practitioners working together.

**Methodology**

The Language Literacy and Numeracy VET Community of Practice was conducted by Cooperative Learning Limited with funding from the NSW Department of Education and Communities. Cooperative Learning Limited is a cooperative of 16 community colleges in Northern NSW.

Participants in the community of practice were selected via an expression of interest process, which took into consideration their skills, knowledge and motivation. The competitive selection process resulted in six participants who represented an even mix of literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners. However, after an early withdrawal and replacement, the project was launched with four LLN and two VET practitioners.
Participants were supported by a project facilitator, whose role included managing the expression of interest process, selecting participants, facilitating communication between participants, directing work timetables and deadlines, coordinating online sessions, facilitating validation sessions, promoting the project, observing the discussion and progress of the participants and researching the theoretical framework for the project.

The community of practice ran from February to December 2012 and involved two face-to-face meetings; ten online meetings, involving knowledge-sharing, validation and reflection; many asynchronous online discussions; two online surveys; and formal training in the unit of competency, TAELLN401A (Address adult language literacy and numeracy from TAE10 — Training and Education Training Package). The participants also spent many hours working in pairs to develop training and assessment strategies for qualifications from the Foundation Skills Training Package.

The project was conducted in four distinct stages:

- exploring participants’ current perspectives and experiences
- working together — developing skills
- working together — developing materials
- reflection.

The findings of the community of practice has certain limitations from a research perspective, considering that it captures the reflections and experiences of only six participants and focuses on a very specific aspect of shared delivery — the planning stage of shared delivery. Therefore, the findings may not necessarily be applicable to a broader group of practitioners or to other models of shared delivery.

**Theoretical framework**

In order to analyse the potential enablers and barriers of literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners working together, an ‘Integral Theory’ framework was chosen. Integral Theory was developed by Ken Wilber in the 1990s and provides a methodology or framework for analysing complex problems. Integral Theory tells us that there are four quadrants or aspects to reality through which we can experience or view the world: The Individual Interior (I); The Collective Interior (We); The Individual Exterior (It); The Collective Exterior (Its) (see figure 1).

According to Integral Theory, any reality, situation, event, project etc. can be broken down into these quadrants and analysed to explore how that particular quadrant impacts on or contributes to the situation. Integral Theory allows us to bring multiple perspectives to bear in the analysis of a situation and suggests that a situation should be considered from the perspective of each of the quadrants. Ignoring any quadrant may lead to disharmony.
Integral Theory was applied to the situation of literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners working together in a shared delivery model (see figure 2). These analyses helped to identify some of the forces, ideas, concepts and infrastructure that may underpin the situation of LLN and VET practitioners working together.

**Figure 2  Integral Theory applied to LLN and VET practitioners working collaboratively**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual interior</th>
<th>Individual exterior</th>
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| • Confidence as a trainer  
• Willingness to learn and share  
• Knowledge and experience of VET  
• Knowledge and experience of LLN facilitation | • Support role for LLN practitioners rather than fully integrated in VET  
• VET trainers seeking assistance in response to “deficit” interpretations of LLN |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective interior</th>
<th>Collective exterior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • Pedagogy:  
Socio-cultural and social capital approaches  
Vs  
Human capital approach | • Funding models  
• Training packages as curriculum  
• Policy about LLN  
• Partnerships |
The community of practice sought to challenge typical practice in the upper right quadrant (individual exterior) and provide a model of ‘shared delivery’. It also sought to explore aspects of the upper and lower left (individual interior and collective interior) by exploring the reflections and experiences of the community of practice participants as they went about the business of working together.

The exploration of potential differences in pedagogy (lower left – collective interior) was of significant interest to the community of practice project and the reflections of the participants indicate an increased awareness of the differences in pedagogy\(^1\) between LLN and VET practitioners.

The teacher’s philosophy is one of the main factors underpinning the choice of methods and practice in teaching. In the case of LLN and VET practitioners, there may be differences in their philosophies and intended outcomes for students. That is, they may have different views about what literacy means and what they are trying to achieve for their students with regard to LLN development.

Lonsdale and McCurry (2004) argue that there are three main concepts of what language, literacy and numeracy means and that these three concepts may impact on pedagogy:

- The acquisition of language, literacy and numeracy skills is a cognitive, individual-based activity involving the acquisition of a set of quantifiable skills. If an individual has not acquired these skills there is a problem with that individual. This model is commonly known as a deficit approach.
- An economics-driven model is associated with workforce training, productivity and ‘functional’ literacy. This model is commonly known as a human capital approach.
- A socio-cultural approach views literacy as a lifelong learning experience, where literacy is contextualised with multiple literacies developing over a person’s life.

More recently there has been much use of the term ‘social capital approach’. This approach suggests that literacy builds networks with others rather than for specific vocational and employment outcomes. A social capital pedagogy demands the creation of opportunities to make many links: teacher to student, student to student and student to outside networks such as employer, community organisations etc. (Leske 2010).

These four concepts of language, literacy and numeracy underpin the researcher’s interpretation of the community of practice participants’ reflections regarding their pedagogy.

Discussion and findings

Phase 1: Exploring current perspectives and practices

During this phase, participants took part in an online survey and both asynchronous and synchronous online discussions. They discussed current perspectives of their role as a literacy and numeracy or VET trainer and their experiences of embedding LLN in VET. They discussed their initial views on the barriers to both categories of practitioners working together. The responses are summarised below:

- time management
- ownership of intellectual property
- different focus/emphasis for student outcome. Limited knowledge in the other’s domain
- lack of experience or knowledge about the scope, conditions and practices of each other’s worlds

\(^1\) In adult education we should perhaps use the term andragogy rather than pedagogy, but generally pedagogy is used as an overarching term and used in this paper to mean the method, practice and philosophy of teaching.
• the VET trainer may only be looking at the level of course and not the ability to adapt the content to allow the student to absorb the information and complete the qualification successfully
• lack of understanding of role of each teacher. No willingness to work as part of a team. Personality clash – different expectations. Lack of resources.

Also in this phase of the project, participants discussed their current practices with integrating language, literacy and numeracy and VET. The following comments are revealing with regard to perspectives and pedagogical approaches:

In LLN support in VET, I have always taken a 2-pronged approach — ‘getting the students through’ the VET component (i.e. modifying materials, making it accessible etc.) and improving LLN skills of students. Obviously, the improvements in LLN skills will be slow and in a short VET course probably minimal. This does not, however, mean it is insignificant.

The concern of ‘engaging students with LLN issues is difficult when their focus is vocational skills development’ points us clearly in the direction of utilising the vocational motivation as the vehicle for LLN development. I see the vocational motivation as the in-build [sic] rationale for students engaging in LLN skills development.

Pre-assessment may be an answer … maybe similar to the Naplan test … informing the trainer of the LLN level of skills for the individual and a suggestion of what VET courses are appropriate for them … This would solve the majority of VET trainer’s problems, I think.

**Phase 2: Working together – learning together**

In this phase the community of practice participants engaged in both formal and informal learning activities. They together attended a workshop on the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and all achieved the unit TAELLN401A, Address adult language literacy and numeracy, some via recognition of prior learning and some via course work. They provided training to each other via online sessions covering topics such as:

- introduction to the ACSF
- scaffolding as a strategy to facilitate LLN
- modes of LLN and VET integration
- streamlining training packages
- industry skills councils’ plans for representing the ACSF in units of competency
- case study of embedding LLN in food safety training.

These opportunities to learn from each other allowed the participants to really appreciate the skills and knowledge of individuals in the group (individual interior) and the environment in which they were operating (collective exterior).

**Phase 3: Working together – developing materials**

In this phase participants developed materials for the Foundation Skills Training Package.

This process involved a VET practitioner and a literacy and numeracy practitioner working together to develop the training and assessment strategy (TAS) for one qualification and the assessment tool for one of the units of competency from the qualification.
In this way they were required to work together, the process allowing the opportunity to learn from each other and become more aware of each other’s areas of expertise.

The approach involved a face-to-face workshop followed by email and telephone contact and online validation sessions.

Phase 4: Reflection

Participants engaged in reflective practice throughout the process of working together in the community of practice. Reflection was conducted using both focus group sessions and individual written responses. Integral Theory was applied to develop the focus questions (see figure 3).

A full account of reflections can be read in the project report located at <www.http://www.chace.org.au/>. For this paper only those comments that relate to enablers and barriers have been recorded.

Figure 3 Reflective questions using Integral Theory

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual interior</th>
<th>Individual exterior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What have you learnt about each other’s skills, knowledge pedagogy?</td>
<td>• How did it work in practice?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Has your perception of your role changed?</td>
<td>• Describe how you shared the workload.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What do you see as the pros and cons of LLN &amp; VET working together?</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Collective interior</th>
<th>Collective exterior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What would you put in an induction package for VET and LLN trainers working together?</td>
<td>• What resourcing helped the process?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• What resourcing / infrastructure was lacking?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Some of the potential barriers to working together were identified as fear and personality concerns (individual interior):

I think a lot of people are hesitant about team teaching, because they feel they might be judged.

Working together, it’s OK in principle, but it doesn’t just work in saying ‘we will work together’ because it’s a personality thing as well, but there must be some strategies and awareness training for both people.

Another barrier identified was lack of funding (collective exterior):

it’s important that what we’re saying is backed up with funding so that people aren’t saying ‘oh we can’t do that because we don’t have time’ because really in relation to what I said before about outcomes, the funding will improve if you do your, if you conduct your courses well, and therefore it justifies the idea of spending more money in talking, planning and doing preliminary assessments and providing extra support.
Many of the comments from participants with regard to the likely success of working together referred to the importance of communication and personality (individual interior). They stated that the right people must be chosen to work together or at the very least they are afforded plenty of time and support to communicate and learn to work together.

We need to make sure that in the course planning there is time to talk together, this program shows a practical model of it, now I can get a visual picture of how it (working together) may work.

The experience of the community of practice shows that learning to understand each other’s ‘roles’ and perspectives is critical to ensuring that the working together is successful. The concept of ‘roles’ refers to an understanding of each other’s pedagogy (collective interior) as well as the practical considerations of who is going to do what and when.

I have learnt that mostly the LLN practitioner is about life skills and getting them to live a better life, whereas the VET practitioner is about gaining work, employment outcomes.

As an LLN teacher ... from my early training, it was sort of always about educating people for life ... But I get the idea that (now) it is really about employment, and this philosophy has really gone into LLN ... and even the Foundation Skills Training Package, it’s a training package, it’s not a curriculum, it’s training people for work, it’s not training the whole person. So we [LLN practitioners] are having to shift a little bit ... we have had a lot of freedom in the past as LLN teachers, and now I think we have to change our thinking.

I am concerned that the VET system will expect that after the trainers have done the TAELLN401A they can then work with the students from an LLN approach. My experience has been this is not enough and we are trying to put too many things on one person.

Many of the participants commented on the importance of learning each other’s language, terminology and processes (collective interior). This process of learning a common language allows for a merging of the LLN and VET practices.

I learnt a lot about training and assessment strategies, VET language, I have a better idea of RTOs and the paperwork required. I appreciated working with someone from the VET industry and understanding their side of things.

I learnt a lot about the language LLN practitioners use within their training. For example ‘scaffolding’ – I associated this with the building trade not LLN requirements.

I really had no experience with training and assessment strategies (TAS), and I have learnt a great deal about reading the qualifications and writing the TAS and being informed about that connection with industry.

There were many comments relating to being given the opportunity to work together and how such experiences provide an excuse for LLN and VET practitioners to talk to each other.

What I really like about the fact that there are quite a few trainers doing that unit TAELLN401A is that they will have the conversations with the LLN people. That’s a stimulus for that conversation and ... I think over time, because I know I have been having conversations over the last two years with the VET trainers about how we can best provide support for students in their programs but I think this is part of a really good step forward because it’s really engaging them it’s a requirement, so yes people do what they have to do, but I think in a really positive way, it prompts the conversations with LLN people.
By participating in the CoP it’s prompted me to have more discussion with the VET staff here in the college locally.

Participants were asked to identify their experiences and perceptions of enablers and barriers to working together. Figure 4 provides a summary of their ideas.

**Figure 4 Summary of enablers and barriers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LLN/VET ‘champions’ in organisations – LLN or VET practitioners with a commitment to working together and a knowledge of different models for working together</td>
<td>Limited understanding of the benefits of LLN and VET practitioners working together</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management support for LLN–VET collaboration</td>
<td>Little experience in team teaching/shared delivery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Projects designed to allow LLN–VET collaboration</td>
<td>Lack of direction regarding LLN qualifications required by those working with learners with LLN needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a shared language and culture of sharing</td>
<td>Not enough time for communication and development of the relationship between the two practitioners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time for planning, communication and evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guidelines for LLN–VET collaboration</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Acknowledgment of pedagogical differences</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limited appreciation for skills/knowledge of the other practitioner (LLN or VET)</td>
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**Conclusion**

This project has contributed to a growing body of information about assisting literacy and numeracy and VET practitioners to work together. The community of practice has modelled a particular type of shared delivery, one that involves the LLN and the VET practitioner working together as equal partners in course development. Participants have reported a greater awareness of and respect for the skills and knowledge of each other and now have a greater awareness of each other’s pedagogy.

The opportunity for working together afforded by the introduction of the Foundation Skills Training Package allowed both parties – LLN and VET practitioners – to exercise their skills with a new product for which neither had ‘ownership’. It allowed them to focus on the product – the training package – as the source of learning need, rather than on the ‘deficiencies’ of their potential students. In this way, the community of practice provided a direct focus on the language, literacy and numeracy demands of the units and on industry requirements.

Reflections show that this was a significant change in approach for at least some of the LLN practitioners, who in the past have focused their attention more on the literacy and numeracy needs of individual students, which is arguably a ‘deficit’ approach to LLN practice. For the VET trainers, the focus on the demands of the training package is more familiar, and for them the learning in the community of practice centred on gaining a deeper understanding of the LLN demands of the units and identifying strategies for facilitating LLN development.

The community of practice participants identified a range of enablers and barriers to LLN and VET practitioners working together. They demonstrated that there needs to be support from

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2 It should be noted that the LLN/VET CoP represents a very small sample of practitioners working in a specific aspect of shared delivery; that is, the planning stage of shared delivery, and their findings may not necessarily be applicable to other situations or other shared delivery arrangements.
management, the trainers and the registered training organisation to encourage collaborative practice. This support must include funding. There also needs to be awareness and acknowledgment of the potential differences that may cause barriers to successful collaboration. Clearly defined roles are critical to successful collaboration, as is a shared language and a common understanding of pedagogical approaches.

Acknowledgments

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