Re-Conceptualising Teacher Education For VET Practitioners: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract

Training of Vocational Education & Training (VET) practitioners is most effective when it models best practice learning and assessment. This paper reports on a project in progress at RMIT University in Australia which is modelling an RPL process for participants in the Diploma of VET Practice. We discuss the inaugural delivery of the Diploma of VET Practice that progresses through four cycles of action learning, each cycle with a different focus: self, student, organisation & VET sector and industry.The core component of the Diploma of VET Practice at RMIT Univrsity is the recognition of prior learning (RPL), a process through which participants are able to gain credit for units of competencies based on skills and knowledge gained through experience in the workplace, in voluntary work, in social or domestic activities or through informal or formal training, or other life experiences. The paper outlines the learning and assessment principles governing the design of the program, the customisation required for the group, the impact of the RPL process on program design and the challenges and breakthroughs for participants and program facilitators.

Keywords: Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), assessment, credit, evidence collection

Introduction

Training of Vocational Education & Training (VET) practitioners is most effective when it models best practice learning and assessment. This paper reports on the inaugural delivery of the Diploma of VET Practice to a group of 26 VET teachers at RMIT[1] University in Australia. At the time of writing this program has been running for three months.

The core component for the program is Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), a process through which participants are able to gain credit for units of competence based on skills and knowledge gained through experience in the workplace, in voluntary work, in social or domestic activities or through informal or formal training, or other life experiences. Applying RPL to any program demands that the program be delivered in a flexible and student centred way. What has been offered at RMIT allows for learners to apply for RPL and then design their own work based learning program in consultation with mentors. The program progresses through four cycles of action learning, each cycle with a different focus: self, student, organisation & VET sector and industry.

In this paper, we firstly place the Diploma in the current Australian VET policy and organisational strategic context. We then outline the structure of the program and the learning and principles governing program design, explain RPL in Australia and how it was applied in this program, explore the impact of the RPL process on program design and by way of conclusion, discuss the challenges for participants and program facilitators.

Background

RMIT University is a dual sector university with both vocational education and higher education qualifications. The VET sector within the university is divided into three Portfolios: SET - science, engineering, technology; DSC - Design, Social Sciences, Community Services, and access programs, and the Business Portfolio. VET programs within these Portfolios range from Certificate level to Advanced Diplomas and Associate Degrees. There are approximately 21,500 students in the VET sector at RMIT and 1800 teaching staff. The University is located in the central city of Melbourne, a capital city in the State of Victoria, Australia, and is one of four dual sector universities in the State.

Demand for a Diploma in VET Teacher Education

For many years there were no national requirements for TAFE teachers to have a teaching qualification in the VET sector. There were variations between states within Australia with an emphasis in VET teacher selection on a relevant industry qualification, and preferably experience in the industry as well. TAFE Institutes have traditionally attracted to teaching trades people, technicians and professionals who have a small business of their own. The Certificate IV in Workplace Assessment was the recognised minimum qualification for the VET sector until it was up graded in 2004 to the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment (TAA). Until recently, there had not been any incentive to gain any further teaching qualifications.

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1   RMIT - Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology

Between 1995 and 2005 there were a number of key reforms within the VET sector that led to a review of VET teaching qualifications needed to meet new policy demands. In 2002 *The Victorian Ministerial Statement on Skills and Knowledge in an Innovation Economy (1)* highlighted the importance of the VET workforce in contributing to positioning the state of Victoria as a knowledge and innovation based economy. The second was the introduction of the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQTF) established nationally agreed arrangements to ensure quality of training by all TAFE Institutes and private Recognised Training Organisations (RTOs) across the VET sector. The third reform was the introduction in Victoria of the industrial award, the Multi Employer Certified Agreement (MECA, which aligned teachers' pay levels to a Diploma level teaching qualification that incorporated a supervised teaching practicum. This Award known as the MECA states that:

> *Progression beyond the fourth incremental point of the Teacher classification is subject to the Employee completing a course of teacher training accredited at Australian Qualifications Framework Level 5 which includes supervised teaching practice and studies in teaching methodology, or equivalent '* (2).

In 2002, a review of existing qualifications was conducted by Monash University , *The role of education qualifications in the development and recognition of TAFE teachers* (3). It explored what was required to support teaching and learning practice in the VET environment taking into consideration the need to support ongoing professional growth and to take into account the drivers of VET education. As a result the Diploma of VET Practice was developed and became the program of choice to meet these requirements. Most TAFE providers in Victoria are now delivering the Diploma program with initially their own staff enrolled in the program.

Structure of the Diploma

The Diploma of VET Practice is a competency based program consisting of five core units plus a choice of four electives. Units can also be imported from another qualification that is at the same level within the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF). The course is 650 hours in length (including supervised practice) and aims to provide skills and knowledge necessary to:
- Teach and assess effectively across a range of VET-related contexts
- Facilitate new insights and problem solving when working with learners
- Manage the learning process to facilitate change and action in learners
- Undertake effective self-assessment in the roles as teacher/trainer in a VET environment, and
- Research teaching methodologies and relevant theoretical knowledge to build teaching capabilities. (4)

To achieve the qualification learners must successfully complete all core units plus the specialist units and undertake 50 hours of direct supervision and 150 hours of other professional practice. The core units of competence are:

- Maintain and enhance professional practice
- Design and develop learning strategies
- Design and develop learning resources
- Innovation in Education and Training
- Facilitate learning in complex environments
- Facilitate action learning projects, and
- Facilitate e-learning.

The choice of electives became a strategic decision for RMIT. As part of the strategic plan to improve the delivery and outcomes in programs it was decided to select electives which would meet the requirements of the AQTF and government policy as well as RMIT's strategic vision. The second principle of the AQTF focuses on quality assessment, so electives that emphasised assessment were particularly important for the university. The second strategic direction was to increase and improve the e learning experience for students enrolled in programs at RMIT. For many years the State Government has encouraged TAFEs to be more flexible in their ability to meet the needs of students, taking into account people who can only attend classes part time due to work and family commitments. Having what we know as an 'on line presence' is essential in this environment. Although there have been a number of programs prior to the introduction of the Diploma to develop staff skill in e learning, it was also recognised that it is difficult for staff to access these programs and the Diploma offered another vehicle to reach practitioners. It also recognised that participants who already have the expertise will be able to apply for RPL.

The electives chosen by RMIT for their teachers were:
- Undertake organisational training needs analysis
- Develop assessment tools for differentiating performance
- Develop and evaluate e-learning resources, and
- Research and design e-learning resources.

Recognition of Prior Learning

RPL is a core component of the way the Diploma is delivered at RMIT, In this section, we explain the dimensions of RPL in the Australian VET sector and how it is implemented at RMIT. Although RPL has been a part of the Australian VET sector for some time, its implementation has been inconsistent. The teachers enrolled in the Diploma program had not necessarily implemented RPL in their own programs and some were therefore experiencing RPL for the first time.

RPL is defined as an assessment process through which people can gain entry to, or credit in, nationally accredited qualifications based on the competencies they have gained in their work experience whether paid or voluntary, in social or domestic activities or through informal, or non accredited formal training.[2] RPL recognises **all** learning regardless of how, when and where it was acquired, provided that the learning is relevant to the unit of

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2   Informal training is usually defined as unstructured and non accredited training, such as coaching, workplace mentoring, attendance at conferences and seminars, incidental instruction, informal acquisition of skills and knowledge, personal reflective practice etc. Formal training refers to structured training that is not accredited within national training system.

competency or the learning outcomes against which it is being assessed. Prior learning can therefore include skills and knowledge gained through:

- Paid work experience - full time, part time or casual in Australia or overseas
- Voluntary work
- Family duties, like raising children or being a carer
- Hobbies or leisure activities
- Unpaid work such as farming, cooking, gardening, fixing things or managing events
- Being coached or mentored (or coaching and mentoring others)
- Attending and participating in seminars, conferences and workshops
- Short courses that are not TAFE accredited
- Having fluency in a language other than English
- Private study and research, and
- Any other life experiences that have given the person competencies that match those in the courses they are applying for.

RPL has been a component of the Australian VET system in one form or another since the 1980s. During that period of time the rationalisations, understandings and practices of RPL have been varied.

On the one hand educators have advocated for RPL as an equitable mechanism for the recognition of individual student capabilities. Industry agencies have come to regard RPL as a cost and time-effective way for employers to audit skill levels and meet the training obligations built into award agreements. Peak bodies and governments have continued to support for RPL as a strategy to materialise VET system policies about flexibility and customer focus. (5)

All Australian VET students are expected to be offered RPL as part of their training. The Commonwealth Government sees RPL as a tool for productivity improvement because of its capacity to provide flexible and speedy access to skills development and qualifications for current workers in particular. RPL is seen as contributing to two key government objectives that are driven by economic and equity agendas: an increase in the proportion of adults who have the skills and qualifications needed to enjoy active and productive working lives, and an increase workforce participation among key groups, such as people on welfare, the mature aged and women. RPL is seen as a tool for achieving the Commonwealth government agenda of increasing workforce participation, increasing productivity, improving flexibility and the uptake of trade training, meeting demand for higher level skills, and ensuring flexible delivery of relevant, high quality training.(6)

At RMIT RPL is promoted to students as an opportunity to:

Complete training in a shorter period of time;
Eliminate the need for training in skills and knowledge they already have;
Reduce study load;
Reduce costs such as learning resources, travel, child care etc;
Advance more quickly to higher qualifications;
Better document of their skills and knowledge that they can use for other purposes like job applications or career planning.

Teachers enrolled within the Diploma of VET Practice experienced the same processes as their own students in applying for RPL. They were therefore able to apply to be assessed for RPL for one or more units within a qualification or for the whole qualification. Although RPL is sometimes thought of as a "front end" pre-assessment process conducted with students who then proceed to undertake the remaining (non assessed) units within a qualification, RPL can be undertaken at any time during a learner's enrolment in a qualification. Collection of evidence for assessment for RPL can be conducted concurrently with studying other non RPL units.

The key steps in the RPL process at RMIT consist of:
1. Provision of information about the RPL process to prospective and enrolled students
2. Decision by student to apply for RPL and for which units within a qualification
3. Advice, support and planning for the students during the collection of evidence against the competencies within the qualification
4. Evidence collection and demonstration of competence by the applicant
5. Assessment decision made by the assessor
6. Decision by the student on future training options or the development of an individual learning plan to complete the qualification.

As an assessment process, RPL must be valid, reliable, flexible and fair. Artifacts, processes and performance provided as evidence must be, as for all assessment, sufficient, valid, authentic and current. Holistic assessment of groups of units of competence is encouraged. In the Diploma of VET practice students are encouraged to begin the process by collecting third party reports of their competence and then build on that through a combination of demonstration of skill to a qualified assessor and provision of various artefacts such as examples of training & assessment plans, reports, emails, performance appraisals etc..

Program Design

With RPL as a core component the program needed to be highly flexible and student centred.

The principles underpinning the program design were:

Designing a learning strategy that best suited individual needs
Promoting metacognitive learning through structured reflection and peer/mentor feedback
Engaging learners in reflective practice
Learning through work based projects and enhancement of current teaching practice
Holistic approach to gaining units of competence
Building confidence in online engagement and diversifying online tools
Participating in collaborative learning groups through action learning sets and the online community
Providing the opportunity for negotiating learning design and program, and
Encouraging innovation and risk taking in a supportive environment

The steps in the program are shown below.

Table 1. Steps in the implementation of the Diploma of VET Practice

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Introduction to the program – the units of competence and the design - and the RPL process
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Students review their competence against the units in the program
Seek clarification of the expectations of evidence and the assessment process
Consult with their mentor
Online program is established including threaded discussion
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Concurrent workshops & forums on RPL & reflective practice are conducted
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Students decide on units for which they will seek RPL, formally apply and establish a plan for evidence collection & assessment milestones
Students begin to collect evidence with the assistance of their mentor
Students develop individual learning plans for completing the remaining units, including assessment methods & schedule
Students form action learning sets[3]
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Students conduct work place projects and practice improvements as per their individual learning plans with the support of mentors
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Concurrent workshops on key themes are conducted and action learning sets meet
↓
Students are assessed at pre-agreed milestones

Of the 26 students in the current program, four decided to apply for RPL for the whole qualification, two decided to not apply for any RPL while the other 20 decided to apply for RPL for one or more units. At the time of writing students were engaged in developing their RPL evidence collection action plans, collecting evidence and writing Individual Learning Plans.

Profile of the Students

As previously mentioned the University has three teaching portfolios – SET, Business and DSC. The students enrolled in the program are distributed across these portfolios with five from the Business Portfolio and eight each from DSC and SET.

The age of the participants ranges from early thirties to mid to late fifties. There are six female and twenty male participants. This reflects the fact that the highest number of participants are from the SET portfolio which has the trade apprenticeships and engineering and infrastructure programs.

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3   Students completing the whole qualification by RPL form a separate learning set. They may attend workshops if they wish. In the current program the students have chosen to attend some of the workshops and in some cases, they will be involved in facilitating these.

Of the 26 participants the majority of them have been working at RMIT for longer than five years. However there are two participants who have only recently joined the organisation and one participant who until recently was an administrative staff member but was motivated to get the initial TAA qualification to be able to teach and assess. This person is now opening doors for promotion and progression through the MECA levels by enrolling in the Diploma qualification.

The motivation for these practitioners to complete the qualification is, as previously stated, to progress through the levels of the Industrial Award and for some who are on fixed term contracts, there is an RMIT requirement for them to have a qualification with a supervised teaching practicum in order that they may qualify for an ongoing or permanent teaching appointment. Their motivation is particularly high because their current short term contracts finish at the end of 2008.

The participants are qualified in their own industry and have considerable experience in such areas as legal practice, architecture, design, engineering, fashion design, conservation and land management. They have expertise in e learning and have managed multiple projects including off –shore programs and engineering projects. Some have PhDs and Masters level qualifications in their own field and have published widely in their field of practice. They do not have a teaching qualification which is why they are enrolled in the programs. They are highly experienced and have joined the program with a great deal of enthusiasm. It also makes them extremely busy people with complex lives, juggling a life of study, a personal life, and sometimes other professional work. This dual workload is a frequent experience of VET practitioners and for some a way of maintaining their own work and/or industry expertise.

Part of the challenge for these participants is to see themselves as educators and facilitators of a learning process. Many are well recognised in their own disciplines and some of them do not see themselves as part of an educative process and as 'education' as a discipline or profession in itself. The participants have all completed a Certificate IV in Training and Assessment, or its predecessor, as a pre requisite to the Diploma program. The TAA introduces the language of the VET sector and explores the development of programs, delivery and assessment and validation but does not, because it is an AQF 4 level program, explore in any depth the principles of learning, the role of an educator and facilitator and education as a discipline. The RPL process is an opportunity for these participants to reflect on these and to explore current practices and in the process understand their own teaching and learning style, their students teaching and learning styles and how knowledge is formed.

The response of the learners to the flexibility and openness of the program has varied. Some have readily embraced the opportunity to undertake the whole qualification by RPL and to others have been excited by the opportunity to design their own work based program. One learner stated that initially he was reluctant to do any RPL, but once he began to explore his skills and knowledge and to delve into the history of his work experience, he realised that he did indeed have the competencies and sufficient evidence for assessment. Other comments included:

I appreciate that we can use evidence from our whole life experience.

I went through the emails I had and my documents and realised just how much I knew and in what areas. A student sent me a thank you card – that's evidence.

I thought RPL would be zero for me, now it's 100% because there is evidence everywhere.

Others lacked confidence in their ability to judge sufficient evidence. This is an interesting response given that some of them are also teachers and assessors in Diploma level programs. What is happening here? Is it a lack of self knowledge and confidence? Is it the concept of assessment that makes them anxious? Is it a lack of experience in transferring their assessment skills to a self assessment context? What understanding of the "self" is operating or being constructed here? (7)

Another learner was surprised by the flexibility and fluidity of the program and wanted to know how this could be done so that he could apply a similar model in his own teaching. In contrast, one of the learners wanted "the textbook" and a series of subjects taught with pre-set assignments for him to undertake.

Conclusion

As students, the teachers in the Diploma program are participating in the practice of innovation. Some have relished the risky environment in which the program is progressively co-designed with facilitators, peers and mentors. In being plunged into this experience they have engaged in what Schon calls "reflection in action". Most students have embraced the RPL process but, as described in the paper, there are some participants who have had very different expectations of program delivery and expectations of a learning experience which is different to the highly flexible and learner centred program being offered. They have come to the program with certain ways of knowing teaching and with a particular practice and have been surprised by the unexpected. This provides them with the opportunity to reflect and within a structured facilitation process or group discussion with their peers they can question their pre-conceived ideas and knowledge "questioning the critical assumptional structure of (their) knowing-in-action".

> `*"We think critically about the thinking that got us into this and we may, in the process, restructure strategies of action, understandings of phenomena, or ways of framing problems."(7)*

This can then lead to experiment and change in practice. The RPL process has therefore provided a vehicle for the participants to critically review their understandings and practice of learning and assessment.

The program is currently within its first cycle - the focus on self through RPL and reflective practice. As the program progresses, the facilitators will continue to collaborate with the learners through reflection not only on the practice of teaching and assessment practice in VET, but on the program itself. It is clear that RPL has provoked some questions about identity of self as learner and teacher. Harris (2006) (8) identifies a series of questions that will be our focus in our continuing reflection on the program:

What effects does RPL have on the learners' identities and self perception?

How do individual learners' journeys through RPL differ?
What understandings of self are at work in and around RPL?
What learner/teacher identities are constructed within the RPL practice?
What shifts in teaching practice result from the experience of RPL?

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