Professional Judgment in Vocational Education and Training: A Set of Resources

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INTRODUCTION

PURPOSE

The purpose of this document is to make a set of resources on the topic of professional judgment easily accessible for the vocational education and training (VET) sector.

The resources were developed and used at a series of forums held around Australia in 2005, by Reframing the Future, the national staff development and change management program for skilling Australia’s VET workforce to implement the national training system. Reframing the Future provides a professional learning framework for educational change, staff learning and organisational capacity-building in vocational education and training.

This set of printed resources is made available to the sector to assist any individual wanting to access the materials or any groups wanting to explore the topic of professional judgment in some depth.

The printed materials are complemented by PowerPoint slides available at www.reframingthefuture.net

WHAT WE PLANNED

Reframing the Future developed a sub-program in 2005 in response to the recommendation in the final report of the High Level Review of Training Packages, ‘Moving On…’ (ANTA 2004) for a new focus on capacity building in VET, instead of a focus solely on compliance:

‘The current compliance framework of the AQTF is a necessary but not sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. What is needed is a capacity-building approach that emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgment and growth rather than simply compliance.’

In targeting the concept of professional judgment, the sub-program specifically addressed a challenge put in ‘Moving On…’ that VET practitioners develop “high-order professional expertise” such as the ability to make “context-specific judgments”.

THE AIMS AND OBJECTIVE WE SET

Our aims in the sub-program were to:

- initiate a robust national dialogue around alternative teaching, learning and assessment practices in the Training Package environment
- strengthen a sense of professional identity and opportunities for networking among practitioners
- build RTO capability in Training Package implementation.

Our objective was to establish ongoing forums for knowledge sharing and generation among VET stakeholders and practitioners in making effective professional judgments about a range of complex issues in teaching, learning and assessment.

A group of people representing a mix of VET providers and industry areas, and who could have an impact in their organisations, were targeted to participate in the forums. The learning and new practice generated by the forums could be disseminated further through a national conference dedicated to new practices in teaching, learning and assessment in VET.

WHAT WE DID

Six forums were conducted in 2005 with up to 50 participants at each. Forums were conducted in August 2005 in Townsville, Newcastle, Perth and Melbourne, and in November 2005 two forums were conducted at the New Ways of Working in VET Forum 2 in Adelaide.

Participants were deliberately drawn from a broad range of VET providers who could bring different experience and skills to their judgments, and who represented providers from different contexts and from a range of industry areas. Some participants also came from other VET stakeholder groups such as industry associations, State Training Authorities and intermediary organisations.
**How we structured the forums**

The forums were seen as the mid-point in a learning activity which began when participants filled in expressions of interest and examined pre-reading materials. The forums were structured around three think pieces presented by their authors and a series of four professional conversations. These structured conversations were conducted at each table of participants and focused on some pre-set questions that extended issues raised in the think pieces.

The forums were followed by interactions of the participants via special interest group and by attendance at the national New Ways of Working in VET Forum 2 in Adelaide in November 2005.

**What happened**

VET practitioners, representing a range of providers, industry and geographical areas, as well as all states and territories, were selected to attend the forums in August, after submitting an Expression of Interest form. Participants’ job roles ranged from RTO directors and managers to workplace trainers and assessors.

The authors of the think pieces and presenters were:

- Dr Anne Jones (Professional Judgment in VET)
- Andrea Bateman and Dr Russell Docking (Professional Judgment, Assessment and the AQTF)
- Dr John Mitchell (Professional Judgment in Teaching and Learning).

The forums were chaired by Suzy McKenna, National Project Director, Reframing the Future.

Following each of the August forums, several of the participants voluntarily formed online Special Interest Groups in order to maintain their new networks and continue developing their practice as a result of new information.

**What the long-term evaluation showed in terms of our aims and objective**

Invitations were sent to participants at the forums, six months afterwards, to invite them to provide written feedback on the sub-program. In general, the comments were very affirming and supportive of the aims of the forums and a selection of their comments follows. All those quoted below gave their permission for their names to be cited.

Regarding our aim in the sub-program to initiate a robust national dialogue around alternative teaching, learning and assessment practices in the Training Package environment, comments from participants included the following.

*Excellent networking with peers, which will continue as long as this discussion continues and further. This is an ongoing, evolving discussion which is crucial to continue for the benefit of the VET sector as a whole.* (Marcia Kelly, NT)

*By being involved in the forum and sharing views, having some guided discussions and being involved in exploring responses to ideas with other participants, stimulates and encourages innovation.* (Anne Shew, NT)

*(Long term impacts will be) Broader networking on issues with members of the Professional Judgement Group and sharing of ideas and resources across TAFE and industry.* (Jennifer Ioakimidis, SA)

*Has given the opportunity to allow myself to listen to other viewpoints outside my field of expertise with a more open mind as I know that some of the opinion will develop my professional judgement.* (Janene Piip, SA)

*We ran a local Prof Judgment workshop (in Darwin and video-linked to Alice Springs) to discuss some of the concepts and issues with both teaching and QA staff. Participants had access to the original think pieces before the workshop and everyone reported favourably on the event. I think it would be worth repeating it in about 12 months’ time.* (Dr Terry Clark, NT)

Regarding our aim in the sub-program to strengthen a sense of professional identity and opportunities for networking among practitioners, comments from participants included the following.

*Reinforced that we are Professionals and what being a Professional implied.* (Judi Buckley, QLD)
My participation has encouraged me to read a diverse range of literature and to share this with the assessors that I have been working with since the forum. (David Gutteridge, Tas)

The Forums and RfP project participation has impacted on my development incredibly, a steep learning curve made gentler through the great people I have met who are in it for the right reasons. (Janelle Hollis, NSW)

I have certainly gained confidence in exercising professional judgement and I take more care in gathering and recording supporting evidence (formative assessment) for a ‘just in case’ scenario. There was a strong emphasis on consistency in assessment, and evidencing fairness has become more important to me. (Jayne Pitard, VIC)

We have been so busy honing our assessment practices to ensure AQTF compliance that we have to some extent downgraded the importance of the assessors’ expertise in the industry or vocational field being assessed and valuing the professional judgements they make. (Margaret Gannaway, WA)

I believe that the forum will be an important milestone in my professional development opportunities as I have developed skills in drawing on my knowledge and experience and other VET professionals’ knowledge and experience before making any complex judgments. I think I have learned more a balanced approach in the decisions I have to make. (Wing-Yin Chan Lee, SA)

Regarding our aim in the sub-program to build RTO capability in Training Package implementation, comments from participants included the following:

My practice has improved in areas such as challenge tests – less emphasis on content, more on meeting industry standards. (Paul Coughlin, SA)

It strengthened and reinforced qualitative collaboration on design, development and interpretation of TAA training package and implementation strategy in QAG and TAFESA North. (Jennifer Ioakimidis, SA)

I now give my post-graduate students(teachers) an exercise in using their professional judgement as part of their assessment for Teaching and Learning Practice. I also record formative assessment in a more formal format. (Jayne Pitard, VIC)

New ways of assessing and looking at levels of professional judgement in the workplace (with particular focus on Commercial cookery) and how it can benefit both trainees and employers…Greater understanding of the Term “Professional Judgement” and how it aligns with the AQTF, and how it can be used to support learning. (Marcia Kelly, NT)

That assessors using their professional judgement is something that has to a large extent been swept under the carpet and these forums have raised its profile and brought it out into the open. I have found the discussion papers a great resource for stimulating discussion at professional development workshops I have run and also in delivering TAAASS501A Lead and Coordinate Assessment Systems and Services and TAAASS404A Participate in Assessment Validation. (Margaret Gannaway, WA)

I've used the concept of professional judgement to develop new ideas for promoting partnership of LLN programs with vocational programs. Since taking part in the Professional Judgment in VET Forum in August 2005, I've spoken to a range of LLN and vocational educators and managers and have used professional judgment to understand the different issues of partnership. I am now working on writing up various models of partnership and integration of LLN with vocational training, which I hope will help to demystify the process and make it more transparent of how different groups can work together. (Wing-Yin Chan Lee, SA)

In relation to our objective to establish ongoing forums for knowledge sharing and generation among VET stakeholders and practitioners in making effective professional judgments about a range of complex issues in teaching, learning and assessment, comments from participants included the following:

My practice has improved in lots of small ways. I feel more confident in my ability, more confident in my understanding of VET. As a consequence I attend more networking functions/forums; am more alert to commercial opportunities in VET, am not intimidated so much by those who have been in VET for a long time; take new ideas on board and improve processes wherever the opportunity arises. (Anne Shew, NT)

I have formed an external validation group with ‘like minded’ providers from non-competitive industries to share best practice, mentor each other and improve our delivery and assessment. (Janelle Hollis, NSW)

The discussions (debates) around professional judgement were needed and the conversations should continue. My participation in the forum has given me the confidence to raise this issue in professional development workshops I conduct with assessors. Making assessment judgements is complex and is not always black and white. Training Package qualifications allow for customization and contextualization – in fact it is encouraged – and in most cases Assessment Guidelines talk about making the assessment judgement but do not include the notion of “professional judgement”. The use of the forum papers in the PD workshops I conduct gives credibility to the discussions and using professional judgement. (Margaret Gannaway, WA)
The selection of quotations cited above represents the majority views of survey respondents, who were uniformly positive and constructive in their responses. They all found value in the forums.

**WHAT OTHER OUTCOMES ARE IDENTIFIABLE**

Other outcomes of the 2005 forums identified by respondents to the 2006 survey included the following:

* I think it has given experienced VET practitioners renewed confidence to make assessment judgment calls. (Dr Terry Clark, NT)
* Gave me more confidence to use Professional Judgement in situations. Ensure what I am doing involves processes and documentation so that professional judgements can be justified. (Judi Buckley, QLD)
* Better quality judgements, broader network of professionals, advanced professional development and leading edge practices. (Paul Coughlin, SA)
* Assists me and my organisation I consult and work with to keep up with impacts of new concepts and changes within and without our Industry including the legislative area. (Tim Byrne, VIC)
* I have developed high appreciation of others’ professional judgement when their decision and choice are different from mine. (Wing-Yin Chan Lee, SA)
* Assisted immensely with the Reframing the Future project I was conducting in 2005. At the point I attended the workshop, I had reached a point where I needed a fresh injection of ideas. Meeting new people and listening to their ideas gave me fresh impetus for my project. (Janene Pip, SA)
* I have become more aware of my use of professional judgement, which I previously dismissed as ‘common sense’. I will promote professional judgement and gathering supporting evidence in my delivery of the Graduate Certificate in VET. I will continue to place an emphasis on gathering and recording supporting evidence myself. My anecdotal evidence will be more important in my assessment. (Jayne Pitard, VIC)
* Gave me deeper understanding of the role of the Professional and how Professional judgements can be justified. The workshop and readings have provided me with evidence and knowledge to better inform others and justify decisions. When preparing units of work I am now more mindful of the ongoing importance of the processes and documenting that support them and the significance these play if Professional judgements are necessary. (Judi Buckley, QLD)

Almost all survey respondents took this opportunity to comment on outcomes, indicating the ongoing worth and impact of the forums.

**WHAT WE WOULD DO THE SAME OR DIFFERENTLY NEXT TIME**

Following our evaluation, if we were to conduct similar professional development activities in future, we would do these things again:

- promote the forums mostly via our email newsletter and on our website
- distribute a promotional flyer
- require that prospective participants complete an expression of interest
- briefly summarise the literature and disseminate as pre-reading
- ask presenters to prepare think pieces for distribution beforehand
- organise the forum around structured professional conversations with ‘leading’ questions.

We would make the following changes:

- instead of organising special interest groups, we would seek the permission of participants to circulate their email details and encourage the participants to network informally
- instead of asking participants to send in feedback forms some months later, we would send email requests to a sample of participants.
HOW TO USE THE RESOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This section sets outs some suggestions about different ways of using the resources.

USING THE RESOURCES

The resources contained in this document can be used as follows:

• By individual VET practitioners seeking an introduction to the topic of professional judgment
• By groups of VET practitioners examining a range of issues within the topic of professional judgments.

Individuals can:

• read the snapshots from recent research and the think pieces
• follow up the references cited at the end of think pieces
• consider the professional conversation questions.

Groups or organisations can do the same as individuals, plus:

• design their own forums or series of conversations on the topic
• select issues raised in the think pieces and focus on them
• add to the think pieces by inviting group members to research issues arising from the discussions
• invite external speakers to talk on issues related to the think pieces.

Groups are encouraged to not concentrate the discussions into one session, but to imitate the developmental process used by Reframing the Future. This includes providing pre-reading and supporting ongoing dialogue after discussion sessions.

USING THE METHODOLOGY OF PROFESSIONAL CONVERSATIONS

The Forums were designed to enable dedicated sessions in which participants could actively engage with others in exploring the ideas and new ways of working in VET that have been presented through the readings and presentations. This participation took the form of ‘professional conversations’.

These conversations gave participants an opportunity to:

• relate the presentations and readings to your own experiences and practice in VET
• consider new ways of working in the future.

Research findings

The opportunity for dialogue with fellow practitioners is not be underestimated, as research shows that:

• professional conversations in which practitioners share their learning can transform practice
• structured dialogue between reflective practitioners often leads to new approaches
• powerful conversations are as much about listening carefully to practicing educators as they are about talking
• within the one professional conversation, participants can clarify their understandings, share their successes and lessons learnt, identify new challenges and investigate solutions
• professional conversations give practitioners time to collaborate with each other, think, analyse and create the conditions for change
• facilitated conversations about professional practice can bring dramatic results, sometimes long after the conversations take place.
Research underpinnings

The research underpinning professional conversations is drawn from a range of overlapping sources:

- Kolb (1984) and Lewin (1951) who advocate action learning and groups undertaking a cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualising and active experimentation where professional conversations provide the forum for sharing reflections and undertaking conceptualisation
- Wenger, Snyder and McDermott (2002) and their focus on communities of practice, which have at their heart conversations between professionals
- Boud, Cressey and Docherty (2006) who promote the benefits in group reflection on practice than individuals reflecting in private.

Some educational bodies such as the National College for School Leadership (http://www.ncsl.org.uk/) promote the practice of professional conversations as a key to learning and transformation. The practice of undertaking professional conversations is also compatible with the approach called appreciative inquiry which encourages reflection on what is working well, what can we learn from experience and what alternative futures can we envision (e.g. see Ludema Whitney, Mohr and Griffin 2003).

Structuring the process

Obviously professional conversations can happen with a minimum of structure. However, in the case of the national forums, it was considered important to introduce some structure for the following reasons:

- Most people did not know the others at their table
- In completing the expression of interest, participants had agreed that at the forums they would focus solely on the issue of professional judgment
- People travelled in some instances very large distances to attend the forums, such as from Darwin to attend to the Rockhampton forum, so it seemed sensible to use a structured approach and to immediately focus in on the issues.

The participants were given the following specific instructions:

- At your table, please appoint a chairperson to help manage the discussion and time
- Appoint a scribe to record the discussion using the coloured paper with the relevant question and clip board
- Allow up to 7–10 minutes per question for discussion
- As a group, you may wish to explore other questions relating to the presentation raised by group members.

References


When the idea was promoted recently that professional judgment lies at the heart of VET practice, the response from VET practitioners was very strong and supportive. In August 2005, over 170 VET practitioners attended Reframing the Future’s, ‘Professional Judgment in VET Forums’, in Townsville, Newcastle, Melbourne and Perth. The forums focused on making professional judgments about complex issues in teaching, learning and assessment in the Training Package environment.

Forum participants were presented with think pieces by Dr Anne Jones, Andrea Bateman, Dr John Mitchell and Dr Russell Docking and then engaged in professional conversations about new practices.

In the opening presentation, Anne Jones recounted how, in her doctoral research, she interviewed VET educators about their experience of assessment judgements. They worked on and off campus in public RTOs, group training companies and enterprise-based RTOs. They worked with national curriculum or Training Packages in automotive, hair and beauty, aged care, veterinary nursing, chemical plant operation, laboratory technology and business administration. This is what she discovered:

What I found of course was that VET educators were out there wading warily but skilfully through the swamp of professional practice. Assessment judgements are not always simple. It is clear that individual educators and teams make judgements within a personal and an historical context and that a range of problems needs to be solved during the assessment process. The experience is ‘thick’.

She concluded that the assessment judgments made by VET educators are characterised by “preparedness, collegiality, working to rules, seriousness of purpose, dealing with predicaments and obligations and pragmatism”.

Presenter Andrea Bateman also focused on assessment, but argued that it needed to be integrated with teaching and learning:

What we must never forget is that assessment in a training environment is about a judgment of a learners’ knowledge and skills and ultimately the extent of their learning. Assessment, as you know, can be diagnostic, formative and summative. Assessment in its broadest sense needs to be part of the teaching and learning program/plan and should be integrated to provide critical information and feedback to the trainers and the learners.

In his presentation, Dr John Mitchell made the case that practitioners need to exercise multiple judgments in order to function effectively in the complex environment of VET. Practitioners need to make continual judgments about how to customise training, how to meet the needs of learners with different learning
styles and preferences, how to satisfy individual learners’ needs for support and how to satisfy the needs of workplace learners and industry clients.

Key themes that emerged from the forums included:

- the importance of seeing VET practice as a profession and VET practitioners as professionals
- the need to achieve a balance between compliance in meeting AQTF requirements and creativity in teaching, learning and assessment practices is critical
- the development of new knowledge and practice in using professional judgment in VET – by integrating research and experience through professional conversations – needs to be fostered.

Feedback following each forum indicated that this was a valuable developmental experience for most participants. In many cases they felt their professional practice was validated, some for the first time. Following is a selection of comments from participants in the first forum in Townsville:

*What new things will you do when you return to your workplace?*

- Review how agile we are as an RTO and review our assessment moderation process.
- I will develop more innovative and diverse learning tools.
- Assessment will be integrated into the teaching and learning process and not dominate.
- I will explore the topics in greater detail with my colleagues back at work.

Responses to other feedback questions included:

- My focus on customising my own training tools and activities for individual clients is OK.
- All institutes are facing similar challenges and opportunities.
- I am competent to judge and not to fear audits!
- Professional judgment is a necessary part of any educative process.
- The organisation has to be prepared to support our desire to improve practice.

One feature of the forums was the establishment of Special Interest Groups, based around topics or themes identified by participants. The topics include: ‘Managing consistency and conflict in professional judgment’, ‘Professional development strategies for professional judgment’ and ‘Professional judgment and workplace training’. These Groups are now developing their thinking and practice further via online forums. Findings by the Special Interest Groups will be incorporated into sessions on professional judgment at the national ‘New Ways of Working in VET Forum 2’ in Adelaide on 3 and 4 November 2005.
Over the last few years, VET research has started to identify the importance of practitioners exercising their professional judgment. The following excerpts from these key reports demonstrate that more effort is required if professional judgment is to be developed, fostered and applied more widely in VET.

### The need for judgment to inform innovation

Interestingly, the introduction of competency-based training in the early 1990s and the industry-led, demand driven National Training Framework in 1996 provided much greater scope to free up VET professional practice and professional judgment, note Mitchell, Clayton, Hedberg and Paine (2003, p.55) in *Emerging Futures: Innovation in Teaching and Learning in VET* (ANTA):

*This new and increasingly diverse environment will increasingly challenge, contest and extend the capabilities required of VET pedagogy, learning design and management, and the professional judgement of teachers and trainers operating from institutionalised systems.* (p. 56)

In response to these challenges to VET practitioners, Mitchell et al. (2003) recommend that practitioners find out about successful practice elsewhere in the sector and match this with appropriate innovations of their own:

*This is not to suggest that VET practitioners simply imitate others, but rather that they use knowledge of other practice as a way of informing their own judgement and professional imagination, and that this helps to open up the possibilities that exist for innovation in their own arena of practice.* (p.103)

### The need to make choices and to adapt

VET programs are now delivered both on and off-the-job, by public, private and non-government providers, in workplaces and in classrooms, in schools, colleges and in-house, face-to-face, on-line and by distance, notes *The High Level Review of Training Packages. Phase 1 Report* (Chappell, Hawke, Rhodes and Solomon, ANTA 2003) The use of multiple settings for learning places much greater responsibility on the increasingly diverse group of practitioners who are now involved in preparing, delivering and managing VET programs at the local level. Chappell et al. (2003) underline the need for practitioners to use their judgment to make choices and to adapt their practices:

*It (the VET context) requires practitioners who have a sophisticated appreciation of the pedagogical choices that are not only available to them but which are also consistent with the context, clients and learning sites that make up the arena in which they work. In short, the successful implementation of VET programs relies on learning specialists who have expertise and a pedagogical orientation that they are able to deploy to meet the increasingly diverse requirements of clients. For example, the learning needs and expectations of remote Indigenous communities, urban regional communities and inner city communities are likely to be quite different. VET teachers and trainers must be able to recognise and adapt their teaching and learning practices in order to respond to such diversity.* (p.21)

### The need for professional practice

Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald and McDonald (2004) in *Enhancing the Capability of VET Professionals Project: Final Report* (ANTA) note that the exercise of judgement is a characteristic of professionalism:

*professionalism includes the following characteristics: a strong motivation or calling, the possession of a specialised body of knowledge and skills ... control of standards, admission, career paths and disciplinary issues, autonomy in organising and carrying out their work, the need for the ongoing exercise of professional judgement and members accept and apply a professional code of practice.* (Senate Employment, Education and Training Committee 1998)
Professional judgment is also one aspect of professional practice, defined as follows:

Professional practice includes expert knowledge of the field, a deep understanding of underlying principles, accumulated experience in the practice of the profession, a familiarity with recent advances in the professional knowledge base, and mastery of the best available techniques and tools. (Masters 2003: 46)

Professional judgment is intertwined with professionalism and professional practice.

THE NEED FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

In the final report of the High Level Review of Training Packages, *Moving On*… (ANTA 2004), Schofield and McDonald call for a new focus on capacity building in VET, instead of a focus solely on compliance:

*The current compliance framework of the AQTF is a necessary but not sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. What is needed is a capacity-building approach that emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgment and growth rather than simply compliance.*

*Moving On*… recommends that VET practitioners develop “high-order professional expertise” such as the ability to make “context-specific judgments”.

THE NEED TO APPLY JUDGMENTS

In response to the call from Schofield and McDonald (2004) for practitioners to develop creativity and professional judgement, Mitchell, McKenna, Perry and Bald in *New Ways of Working in VET* (ANTA 2005), describe numerous teams of VET practitioners who used their creativity and applied professional judgment in implementing Training Packages. This led to the enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment. Teams of practitioners provided examples of creativity and professional judgment in:

- implementing a qualification not previously offered in a local region
- embedding sustainability principles in the delivery of Training Packages
- integrating employability skills in training
- establishing a simulated working production company for the delivery and assessment of a Training Package. (p. 5)
VET PROFESSIONALS MAKING GOOD JUDGEMENTS:
A THINK PIECE BY DR ANNE JONES

Judgement has become a common leitmotiv in popular culture (Beckett & Hager, 2000; Smith, 1999). The need to make a ‘judgement call’ is often acknowledged with a sense of pride, almost as an affirmation of the worth of the speaker, an antidote to the alienation of the individual in the post-modern world (Sloop 1998). Making a ‘judgement call’ implies that one is being active, committed, accountable, powerful, and ethical, like a courtroom judge. McDaniel and Sloop insist that the re-emergence of judgement as a ‘vital cultural topic’ in part reflects the fact that the judgement process is most valued as a human activity when it is difficult, when we cannot be sure which voice is right: as when an umpire must call a strike or a ball when only doubt is in his mind (McDaniel & Sloop, 1998).

What then of the experience of VET educators in making assessment judgements in the post-curriculum age? Do they experience assessment judgements as autonomous and professionally empowering events? How do we prepare educators to make good judgements? What sort of professional practices sustain wise judgements?

For VET educators, the early years of the training reform agenda generated a confusing mythology about the act of making an assessment judgement. This was the mistaken belief that assessment criteria could fully and accurately describe performance so that a skilled practitioner, with limited training, could easily make an assessment decision. The mythology promised that competency-based assessment would be a case of ‘tick and flick’, the reality was that it required a high degree of ‘…interpretation and judgement’ (Bull, 1985). Recent developments such as the High Level Review of Training Packages have identified the need to debunk the mythology. However, over the last ten years, it has had a powerful effect on perceptions of VET work, contributing to the uncertainty about the professional status of VET practice.

My own interest in this problem grew as I worked with my colleagues to implement competency-based assessment in our courses. I noticed that my colleagues constantly raised judgement as an issue. For example, Helena, Microbiology educator extraordinaire, talking to me about her first attempts at designing competency based assessment of students’ bacterial cultures, cried out in frustration, ‘…but we have to make judgements!’

As I began formal research into this area in 1996, a colleague asked about my work. Upon being told that I was interested in the role of judgement in competency based assessment, this she became puzzled and asked what judgement had to do with competency based education. Surely, she argued the point of competency based education was that you did not use judgement! This was an interesting perspective and one that was argued in the academic literature at the time. A number of the early writers on CBT in Australia identified assessment judgement as a critical issue for educators (Bailey, 1995; Mulcahy, 1996; Robinson, 1993). Some exhorted course developers to do better and get those assessment criteria right (Watson, 1993). Others identified that a great many judgements are involved in the design and delivery of all assessment techniques including competency based assessment (Bailey, 1995).

My research into how VET educators make assessment decisions continued into the early 2000s. It led me to understand the nature of the judgements that VET educators make and to see that these are central to professional VET practice and the foundation for quality learning in the VET system. Not surprisingly, I discovered that an understanding of VET assessment judgements lay at the heart of other vexed issues in VET practice such as the question of consistency in assessment practice. However this short discussion cannot address all of these. For the remainder of this paper I will focus on the relationship between our understanding of how VET educators make assessment judgements and our perceptions of VET professionalism.

IS VET PRACTICE A PROFESSION?

The community has long regarded university and school teaching as professions in Australia. Elsewhere in the world teaching in institutions similar to VET institutes is also regarded as professional work. For example in the United States community college educators are often referred as professor. However the status of
Australian VET educators has long been problematic. How can we know what it means to be a professional and whether or not VET teaching is a profession?

In his book *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, Michael Eraut explores the vexed ideologies of professionalism; the endless debates about which occupations are or are not professions, who’s in and who’s out. He claims that most discussion on professionalism is highly influenced by conventional understandings of the characteristics of ‘high-status professions’ such as medicine and law. These are characteristics such as: the existence of a professional knowledge base; some form of formal professional preparation at university level; entry through a qualifying examination, membership of a professional institute or association; adherence to a professional code of practice and the idea that the professional is an autonomous worker, self-employed or a partner in a small practice. Eraut shows us that in the twenty-first century many of these so-called characteristics of professions are illusionary. For example these days most doctors and lawyers are employees and any professional code of practice has to take that circumstance into account.

Eraut argues persuasively that the nub of professional practice is not so much the formal knowledge as the ability to make a professional judgement. Respect for professionals arises from our admiration for skilful decisions made in challenging circumstances. Think ER any Thursday night. Eraut emphasises that professionals learn how to make professional judgements on the job. Their initial professional education is merely an important preparation for further work-based learning, especially learning from distinct challenging sets of circumstances or case-based learning. All professionals make sound judgements based on their experience of similar situations or cases just as judges follow precedent. As an individual professional’s experience grows so does their ability to make increasingly complex judgements.

Schön like Eraut has written extensively on professional education (*The Reflective Practitioner and Educating the Reflective Practitioner*). Schön also maintains that professional judgements are made when the going gets tough. Schön refers to professionals as those who solve problems encountered in the ‘…indeterminate, swampy grounds of practice’. Many writers on professional judgement echo Schön’s view that professionalism is displayed in ‘…in unique, uncertain and conflicted, situations of practice’. In the same way, long time Australian Football League Chair, Ross Oakley, has commented that ‘good judgement comes from experience, experience comes from poor judgement.’

For my doctoral research, conducted in 1999 and 2000, I interviewed VET educators about their experience of assessment judgements. They worked on and off campus in public RTOs, group training companies and enterprise-based RTOs. They worked with national curriculum or Training Packages in automotive, hair and beauty, aged care, veterinary nursing, chemical plant operation, laboratory technology and business administration.

What I found of course was that VET educators were out there wading warily but skilfully through the swamp of professional practice. Assessment judgements are not always simple. It is clear that individual educators and teams make judgements within a personal and an historical context and that a range of problems needs to be solved during the assessment process. The experience is ‘thick’. I concluded that the assessment judgements made by VET educators are characterised by: preparedness, collegiality, working to rules, seriousness of purpose, dealing with predicaments and obligations and pragmatism.

**Preparedness** refers not only to the preparations made before making an assessment but also to the formal and informal preparation of the assessor over time. Several educators I interviewed spoke of the ‘set of questions’ they had in their minds when assessing learners’ practical skills. Such assessments often took place during the ‘hot action’ on the factory floor and depended on these almost intuitive lists built up over many years:

> If I haven’t done it for a while I’ll have to get a little mental checklist going... but generally if you start off by asking them what sort of problems they have with X then it comes back to you... but if I haven’t assessed a person on the operation of a boiler then I have to develop a checklist for that because it’s a rare event (Tim, chemical plant assessor).
I used the term *collegiality* to refer to the fact that every educator I interviewed regarded assessment as a social process. In particular, they mentioned the importance of their relationships with colleagues in developing their sense of the standards to which they were assessing. This idea of the real standard defined through practice as opposed to the documented curriculum or Training Package standard is an important concept in understanding how VET professionals work:

*The syllabus is written in a standard where it gives you a set standard that the student must reach…and it says they must …dismantle, prepare a chart, put the thing back together. It must run without noises, without an oil leak…so there’s a set standard, but of course everyone’s idea of that standard varies up and down. So it does leave itself open to the interpretation of the individual (Bruce, Automotive Studies Teacher, Lawson Institute).*

By working to *rules* I mean the peculiarly complex layers of regulation and institutionalised practice which surround VET practice. VET educators have to deal with the requirements of their own employers and clients as well as Training Package specifications. One intriguing example I encountered was the work of an automotive industry assessor who assessed in various workplaces on behalf of a group training company:

*I’m doing two people on the same day. One at a taxi organisation, one at a Porsche dealership. Now the quality, the standard, in the taxi place is get the bloody thing out, it’s a money making machine. I don’t care just as long as it looks yellow, get it out there, all right. The Porsche, totally different, isn’t it? Right! It’s got to be this mirror finish, the exact same colour, and the customer’s got to be happy because the car’s worth $100,000 (Kevin, Automotive Industry Assessor).*

My concept of *seriousness of purpose* refers to the surprising degree to which ethics and values matter to VET educators. All of my informants mentioned values in some context. In assessing learners they were concerned with unspecified criteria representing larger ‘goods’ such as the good of the individual learner, the good of organisations, the good of industry and the common good. For example, Tim, the chemical industry assessor, spoke of the influence the Longford disaster had on his assessment work:

…*it’s not being bloody minded or something like that, it’s maybe around safety…they’re out of touch with the Oc Health and Safety Act and they know a little bit of it so to feel more comfortable I’ll give them the whole module to do (Tim).*

As with other professionals, experienced VET educators weave their way through a maze of predicaments and obligations when they are making assessment judgements. I asked participants to tell me about times when it had been difficult to make an assessment decision about a learner’s level of competence and the stories poured out. The difficulties included ethical, political and personal predicaments, lack of resources and social tensions. Interestingly there is usually a significant team influence as groups of educators in staffrooms and offices spend time in conversations about their work, resolving conflicts and working through issues. The VET educators I interviewed often revealed a sense of pragmatism and in some cases expediency in their stories. Such *pragmatism* can be a powerful and moral component of professional judgement, representing the desire to do the best one can in difficult circumstances.

This takes us back to the theorists. Eraut and Schön maintain that the development of professional knowledge through experience is essentially a private experience. However professions support their members to turn their private knowledge into shared public knowledge through shared reflection with colleagues, at conferences and in publications. The success of initiatives such as Reframing the Future and Learnscope is no doubt due to the opportunity these provide for shared reflection on practice.

Based on their ability to make professional judgements, it is clear that VET educators undertake professional work. Whether or not they are part of a profession, however, is another question. A profession exists where members have the time and space needed to engage in professional conversations, to share reflections and turn private experiences into public knowledge. As a system we need to ensure that VET educators have the time and space they need. This will support the development of the VET profession and ensure that the system benefits from the knowledge developed by individual VET practitioners.
Bibliography


What are the factors driving, facilitating and impeding new practices in VET teaching, learning and assessment in a Training Package environment? An assessment perspective.

This paper is presented as part of the Reframing the Future Forums – 2005 Engaging VET Practitioners. It aims to raise issues and encourage discussion and debate amongst the participants.

BACKGROUND

Professional judgement in competency based assessment is intrinsically linked with the notion of professionalism and professional practice.

Enhancing the Capability of VET Professionals Project: Final Report (ANTA 2004a) notes that the ‘exercise of professional judgement’ is considered a key characteristic of professionalism (Senate Employment, Education and Training Committee 1998 as cited in ANTA 2004a) with professional practice said to include:

- expert knowledge of the field, a deep understanding of underlying principles, accumulated experience in the practice of the profession, a familiarity with recent advances in the professional knowledge base, and mastery of the best available techniques and tools. (Masters 2003, p. 46 as cited in ANTA 2004a)

I think that this definition is important in terms of the expertise of the assessor, and will refer back to this at the end of the paper.

PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT IN COMPETENCY BASED ASSESSMENT

With the implementation of Training Packages and the focus on assessments conducted on and off the job, the processes, methods selected and judgements made have become increasingly important. In recent times the emphasis from ANTA has been on the notion of ‘consistency’ of assessment and the integrity of the qualifications.

Competency based assessment is often defined as collecting evidence and then making a judgement as to whether competence has been achieved. However, Bailey (1994) emphasises that ‘assessment of competency is not simple’. Gillis and Bateman (1999) expand this definition of competency based assessment to include:

- clearly defining the purpose,
- identifying and documenting the evidence required to demonstrate competency,
- using appropriate evidence gathering methods,
- interpreting the evidence against the competency standards, and
- making a judgement (Gillis & Bateman 1999).

Included in this model is record keeping procedures and the reporting of outcomes of the assessment.

This model requires a range of decisions which must be made by the assessor in the development of assessment tools and undertaking assessments. Gillis and Griffith (2005 unpublished) argue that content and context specific assessments are an issue of validity. Down & Hager (1999) note that ‘sound judgements take into account the particular circumstances in which they are made. That is they are contextually sensitive’. Hence assessors should be cognisant of the target group, the purpose of the assessment and the context of the assessment so as to be able to develop valid assessment tools and make sound interpretations and judgements.

Much of the literature around professional judgement of skilled professionals refers to ‘tacit knowledge’, and ‘gut feeling’, however this is an elusive notion and we often try to verbalise or describe it, albeit unsuccessfully. The literature suggests however, that there is a strong relationship between ‘knowing’ or knowledge and that of judgement.
Drivers of innovation

So what are the drivers of innovation in assessment? There is very little literature here to assist in this discussion.

Moving On…, the Final Report of the High Level Review of Training Packages (Schofield and MacDonald 2004) considers that Training Package implementation has enabled trainers and assessors a level of innovation and flexibility in designing training and assessment. In this instance, the Training Package specifies the knowledge and skills required as well as the context of the workplace; it does not specify how teachers/trainers will design the learning program and resources, nor provide restrictive information pertaining to assessment. CURVE and University of Ballarat (2003, p. 9) in their scoping study confirm that...

...VET practitioners are delivering in a range of contexts, using broad ranging strategies and various tools and technology to meet the needs of diverse learners. It has also found clear evidence that a considerable amount of effective and innovative teaching and learning is taking place.

They noted that the examples of quality pedagogical practice can be characterised as having three distinct, interlinking features. These are:

- A learner centred approach – with a focus on the needs and learning styles of learners with the teacher or trainer as facilitator.
- Work place relevance – with a focus on teachers and trainers with good industry links who are knowledgeable about work practices and able to contextualise learning experiences regardless of the context of learning.
- Flexibility and innovation in translating Training Packages into learning experiences – with a particular focus on customised and integrated learning and assessment strategies.

Impediments to innovation

As previously mentioned, the High Level Review (Schofield and MacDonald 2004) considered that Training Package implementation has at best enabled trainers and assessors a level of innovation and flexibility in designing training and assessment. However, at worst the feedback indicated that Training Packages have led to confusion, poor practice and atomisation of assessment, with the frequent use of checklists against performance criteria. The High Level Review team however consider that it isn’t Training Packages per se that lead to the atomisation of assessment but that it is a result of poor competency standard design and poor assessment design and practice.

The implementation of Training Packages has occurred during the period of the introduction of the AQTF. Although important in terms of quality assurance of the system, the High Level Review (ANTA 2004b) considers that the AQTF is not a sufficient means of ensuring good quality teaching, learning and assessment. The AQTF Standards for RTOs, Standards 8 ‘RTO Assessments’ and 9.2 ‘Validation of assessment strategies’ relate specifically to the quality and integrity of assessment. However, one of the major criticisms of the framework is that it is process and input driven and not outcomes focused and hence may not have a critical impact on the quality of assessment and on professional judgement.

In addition, it may be that this framework and its ‘compliance’ approach in essence hinders rather than hampers innovation and quality assessments. Furthermore, the audit model adopted by relevant Registering/Course Accrediting Bodies may in fact mean that assessors are responding in assessment design and tool development with a compliance approach rather than an innovative and context specific manner. The audit methodology and the concerns of assessors attached to determinations of non-compliance may in fact lead to what Clayton et al (2004) consider a key factor that impacts on the confidence of assessors in making assessment judgements.
It is important to note that the research conducted by Clayton et al (2004) was undertaken in the late 1990s through to 2000 and hence prior to the introduction of the AQTF. In their research, Clayton et al (2004, p. 8) defined ‘confidence’ as ‘a sense of trust in the quality of the information provided to learners, the validity of the assessment tools, and the reliability and fairness of assessment procedures’ and considered that the key factors that impact on the confidence of assessors in making assessment judgements include the skill and experience of assessors as well as the clarity of competency standards.

Common across the literature (Clayton et al 2004, Docking 1997, Jones 1999) is that there is a relationship between the level of expertise and tacit knowledge and that of making sound judgements. The findings of Clayton et al (2004) indicate a deficit of assessor expertise possibly resulting from what they say is poor initial assessor training, lack of on-going support and professional development and neglecting assessor vocational skills and knowledge. I suggest that this lack of vocational skills may also encompass the lack of sensitivity and knowledge of current workplace practices alluded to as being important in sound assessment judgements.

Schofield and MacDonald (2004) suggest that Training Package transitional issues may result from the lack of support materials. To this I say, caution. Purchased resources (including assessment tools) are not context specific and hence, without adaptation by the assessor cognisant of the target group and the context of learning and assessment, validity can be questioned.

**STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE PROFESSIONAL JUDGEMENT AND INNOVATION**

What bothers me about the above discussion is that Training Packages and the AQTF can be seen as both drivers and inhibitors. It may be that it is the attitudinal characteristics and expertise of the assessors that impact on the notion of innovation and creativity rather than Training Packages and the AQTF per se.

The High Level Review (ANTA 2004) considers that to improve quality assessments what is needed is a capacity building approach that ‘emphasises quality, creativity, professional judgement and growth rather than simply compliance’ (p. 5).

The AQTF Standards for RTOs provides guidance to assessors by focusing on the key underpinning principles of assessment and rules of evidence (Standard 8.1). In addition, it provides some guidance of a key quality assurance and continuous improvement strategy – ‘validation’ (Standard 9.2). Support resources, such as the Training Package Assessment Materials Project (2001 ANTA/DETYA), have provided assessors with readily accessible information pertaining to assessment.

Clayton et al (2004) note that the literature overwhelmingly suggests that strengthening quality assurance processes of the RTO is a critical strategy for improving assessment. This notion is also reinforced by Schofield and MacDonald (2004).

The literature also notes that there are a number of key quality assurance strategies that can be employed to enhance the professional judgement of assessors. CURVE and the University of Ballarat (2003) in their scoping project note that the feedback from practitioners included the following:

Opportunities for sharing knowledge and building skills were seen as critical to the process and informants referred to networks, mentoring, professional development and action learning as ways that this could occur both formally and informally.

**Four strategies are:**

1. **Professional development**
   - Providing avenues for professional development is a key factor mentioned in Enhancing the Capability of VET Professionals Project: Final Report (ANTA 2004a). Professional development activities are varied including communities of practice, mentoring and networks, and the latest information pertaining to pedagogy and knowledge of and sensitivity to the workplace context.

2. **Validation/Moderation/Verification or is it just coming to a common understanding?**
   - Within the AQTF, validation involves reviewing, comparing and evaluating assessment processes, tools and evidence contributing to judgements made by a range of assessors against the same standards. There are various approaches to moderation but the most commonly cited in competency based
Professional Judgment in VET

Assessment is that of consensus moderation (Foyster 1995). Consensus moderation provides an avenue for professional development and for shared understanding of benchmarks. Other moderation forms may include: visitation, peer/group and expert. Regardless of when it occurs in the assessment cycle the aim of verification is to come to some form of common understanding.

3. Exemplars

The development and use of exemplar assessment tools is often cited as strategy to provide sample assessment tools or evidence which are agreed to be good examples. Again these provide assessors with further understandings regarding assessment requirements.

4. Integration with teaching and learning.

What we must never forget is that assessment in a training environment is about a judgment of a learners’ knowledge and skills and ultimately the extent of their learning. Assessment, as you know, can be diagnostic, formative and summative. Assessment in its broadest sense needs to be part of the teaching and learning program/plan and should be integrated to provide critical information and feedback to the trainers and the learners.

Conclusion

I would like to refer back to the definition of professional practice and remind the participants that it includes:

- expert knowledge of the field,
- a deep understanding of underlying principles,
- accumulated experience in the practice of the profession,
- a familiarity with recent advances in the professional knowledge base,
- and mastery of the best available techniques and tools.

I also believe that it includes participation in extensive professional dialogue, critical self-reflection and the capacity to critique own and other peers’ practices. It also includes a set of professional standards to not only direct practice but also to drive professionalism (ANTA 2004a).

References


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What are the factors relating to AQTF compliance impeding new practices in VET teaching, learning and assessment in a Training Package environment: a think piece by Dr Russell Docking

As an Auditor, I have seen many training organisations bend over backwards, keeping their nose to the grindstone and their back to the wall, and still trying to keep their chin up and put their best foot forward in order to make sure they are seen to fit the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF). Many report that they are crippled by the paper-work required to address the minutiae of the standards and by the need to put in place policies and procedures that are not relevant to their scale and scope of operations.

Can you think of some examples of how an RTO might distort its activities to comply with AQTF or Training Package standard?

Is this really necessary? Should compliance with the requirements of the AQTF or of Training Packages really require such contortions? Is it the function of the AQTF to make all RTOs the same, or is there room for flexibility, individuality and responsiveness? Should ‘one size fit all’? Do we really want uniformity?

What impact does the expectation of uniformity have on the exercise of professional judgement about VET teaching, learning and assessment?

RTOs frequently resort to purchasing ‘ready-made suits’ to ensure that they comply with VET quality requirements. These products can include curriculum materials and texts, assessment tools, and AQTF compliance templates. They may carry such esteemed labels as ‘NRT’ or ‘ANTA’ … but are these labels a guarantee of compliance?

Have you come across published curriculum materials or assessment tools that have all the appearance of quality, yet fall short of AQTF or Training Package requirements? In what ways don’t these resources fit?

It is the responsibility of the RTO to exercise professional judgement to confirm that published materials comply with VET quality standards … and to modify or supplement such resources when they don’t. It is not uncommon to find these resources carry a disclaimer in very small print denying any responsibility for the quality of the materials or any adverse consequences arising from their use. Recognition of their untested status is also to be found in their request for feedback and improvement from the practitioners who use the materials.

Professional judgement also has to be exercised on matters where the AQTF is silent (such as the evaluation of training delivery) or where Training Packages are imprecise, ambiguous or inconsistent (such as the status of knowledge). In such circumstances the auditor is no better placed than the RTO in judging compliance, but is well placed to observe whether judgement has been superficial or well thought through.

What aspects of professional judgement are not guided by the AQTF or Training Package standards?

Summary…

Does quality depend upon uniformity, or can we recognise quality in different ways? How can we enable RTOs to be flexible and distinctive, and yet still demonstrate compliance with the AQTF?

Think peace!
The case for judgment

This paper draws on recent research to make the case that practitioners need to exercise multiple judgments in order to function effectively in the complex environment of vocational education and training (VET). Practitioners need to make continual judgments about:

- how to customise training
- how to meet the needs of learners with different learning styles and preferences
- how to satisfy individual learners’ needs for support
- how to satisfy the needs of workplace learners and industry clients.

Judging within an ever-changing environment

Dickie, Eccles, FitzGerald and McDonald (2004) found considerable consensus in Australia about the features of the environment in which VET professionals will be expected to work in the future:

- an environment characterised by increasing diversity in the client base; increasing sophistication in client expectations; change in products and expansion of options for training delivery; changes in employment, work roles, team structures and places of work; increasing competition and increasing demand; and globalisation of the training market. (p.4)

Dawe and Guthrie (2004) provide an example of this future environment in discussing the new roles VET providers can play in providing training for innovative enterprises. They find that assisting innovative enterprises requires the use of different strategies by VET practitioners and the development of additional capabilities by VET providers:

…this may require working more effectively across disciplines and developing more personalised arrangements for delivery. VET providers need to identify where their strengths lie and build industry partnerships in these areas. Close collaboration with industry partners will enable VET providers to ensure the appropriate balance of practical and theoretical skills. (p.19)

Harris, Simons and Clayton (2005) asked VET practitioners to identify drivers of change in the sector. Internal drivers identified by practitioners included:

- increased expectations of clients for responsiveness
- pressure for greater accountability
- rethinking approaches to teaching and learning and access to learning opportunities
- changing workloads
- student characteristics.

Note particularly the need to rethink ‘approaches to teaching and learning’: that is, the fundamentals of VET need rethinking, by practitioners, in the current environment.
JUDGING CUSTOMISATION

Innovative teaching takes account of individual learners’ differences, responding to the contemporary push for all organisations, including educational ones, to be customer-centred:

Innovative teaching fosters lifelong learning, moving VET away from the ‘content model of education’, based on a teacher-designed curriculum and to more fluid and interactive learning processes which move both student and staff members into a new and different experience of VET. (Mitchell et al. 2003, p.2)

VET industry clients and individual learners increasingly expect that products and services will fit their particular needs and that customised programs and even personalised services will become standard offerings. Mitchell et al. (2003) use fifteen case studies and vignettes to describe VET providers customising learning for the following types of learners, groups and learning styles:

• different types of individual learners including equity groups such as disability, Indigenous, ethnic, literacy and 15–19 year olds
• different learner groups such as mature-aged workers and trainees
• learners with different learning styles, including verbal and non-verbal.

The report also examines the need to customise teaching and learning for different settings, varying from traditional educational institutions, to simulated workplaces to a variety of enterprise workplaces.

Let’s examine the challenges of making good judgments about learning styles.

JUDGING LEARNING STYLES AND PREFERENCES

Catering for individual learners’ differences in VET is a major undertaking, given the vast range of learners and settings:

…teaching and training staff need to move beyond their own habitual or acquired personal and professional learning styles to satisfy the diversity of student cohorts. These can range from 15 – 19 year olds, to Indigenous students, to mature-aged students, to busy professionals with limited time, to parents returning to study after raising a family. (Mitchell et al. 2003, p.32)

While the ideal may be to satisfy individual learners’ needs in VET, there are many different ways to interpret the differences between learners. For example, Burns (2000, pp. 43–78) suggests that four different schema can be used to analyse students’ individual differences:

• theories related to the study of personality traits and the effects of personality on behaviour, for example theories about introverts and extroverts
• theories related to values and preferences, for example a student used to teacher-dominant classroom settings may resist self-directed learning opportunities
• theories related to styles of thinking, for example Sternberg’s theories about legislative, executive and judicial styles of thinking
• theories about the effect of memories on goal achievement.

To cater for individual learners’ differences, Mitchell et al. (2003) note the popularity among Australian VET practitioners of:

• the Learning Style Inventory developed by Kolb, with its categories of accommodating, diverging, assimilating and converging
the Learning Styles Questionnaire of Peter Honey and Alan Mumford, with its categories of activist, theorist, pragmatist and reflector.

Smith (2005) finds that VET teachers typically develop their own theories of learning style – largely seen as preferences – either without reference to established theory, or on a basis of a theory they were aware of and that had appeal to them (p.8). Smith suggests that further investigation in VET would be useful in establishing the effectiveness of teacher-generated pragmatic notions of learning style and forms of response to learning enhancement or learner experience. (p.6)

Smith and Dalton (2005) recommend that professional development for VET practitioners should include an examination of learning style theories, but ultimately should be focused on good practice:

Professional development in the area of style is likely best contextualised into good practice by teachers rather than placed in a context of learning styles theory. Notwithstanding that, there is value in a theoretical understanding where the opportunity for observation of students is more limited, and to provide the teacher with the ideas to more systematically observe and respond to style. (p.2)

Despite the popular promotion of self-directed learning in VET, Smith (2000) shows that it is not suitable for all learners, including in the workplace. Apprentices are thought to generally prefer learning in structured environments that provide opportunity for direct social interaction with their fellow learners and with their instructors. These learners may exhibit lower preferences for learning through verbal means such as reading or listening. The strong preference of apprentices, as non-verbal learners, is for learning through hands-on experience, demonstrations and practice.

JUDGING INDIVIDUAL LEARNERS’ NEEDS

Practitioners need to make multiple judgments about forms of support for learners. Misko (2000) identifies the following forms of support and guidance, believing them to be essential to the success of student participation in any form of learning:

- the need for supportive instructional activities
- clear instructional materials
- opportunities to discuss problems or issues with teachers and peers
- availability of teacher support
- timely feedback
- practical examples and
- enough time and willingness to practise skills and meet requirements.

Moynagh and Worseley (2003) suggest that, due to teacher shortages, future learning environments for post-16 learning will be tailored for individuals and small groups and could include:

- virtual reality
- intuitive modes of thought
- larger learner-teacher ratios
- more teacher assistants
- self-directed learning
- collaborative learning online
- new forms of continuous on-line assessment
- automated record keeping
- peer-led group work.

In these many different environments, tailoring learning will require refined judgments.
There is an increasing focus in VET on meeting the needs of online learners. Educational issues surrounding online learning such as quality, instructional design and teacher support systems are analysed by Harper, Hedberg, Bennet and Lockyer (2000), Brennan, McFadden and Law (2001) and Cashion and Palmieri (2002). This research indicates that learners participating in online courses will increasingly require considerable support and guidance from training providers supplying the online products and services.

Brennan et al. (2001) believe that a number of preconditions are necessary if the goal of improved learning outcomes for students in an online environment is to be achieved. The preconditions include:

- taking into account differences in student backgrounds in every phase of the design and delivery of online materials and support
- catering for the differences in learning styles and preferences of students
- focusing on the communicative and interactive dimensions of the new environments
- not expecting technology to solve all the hard problems.

Brennan et al. (2001) suggest that teachers and trainers can be prepared to use new technologies flexibly and beyond minimum levels of competence and that teachers can focus on explicitly enhancing information literacy skills in students.

**JUDGING THE NEEDS OF WORKPLACE LEARNERS**

In addition to the debates and issues raised by learning styles, VET practitioners are being challenged by the use of the workplace as a common learning environment and the different ways learning can occur in the workplace. Tynjala, Valimaa and Sarja (2003) note that learning in workplaces is different from learning in educational institutions. It is often as follows:

- group-based, not individual
- practical not mental
- involves contextual reasoning more than symbol manipulation
- is situation-specific and not focused on generalised skills and principles.

Wood (2004) finds that fully on-the-job training is viewed by learners and registered training organisations as a good way to learn as it provides flexibility for all concerned and financial incentives to employers. With appropriate support for learners, benefits of this type of training include learning that is customised, and learning that encompasses real work experiences and is relevant to the individual and the enterprise.

However, suggested areas for changes to on-the-job training include improving the following:

- the level of networking among students
- the levels of time management skills of learners
- the balance between work and study requirements
- the level of theory training
- and the way trainees are valued in the workplace. (Wood 2004)

As VET providers pursue the goal of providing customised learning services for each enterprise, practitioners are becoming more aware of the specific preferences of individual learners within enterprises for services and support. Mitchell et al. (2003) find that learners want services and support that lead to better outcomes and have the following characteristics:

- Ensuring relevance. VET clients and customers increasingly want knowledge and skills that are marketable or relevant, either for organisations and their staffing demands, or for individuals to secure greater employability and choice in paid or unpaid work and lifestyle.
- Providing ‘just for me’ training. Increasingly, VET clients and customers want to develop these skills at times, in ways and at locations that suit them, not the VET provider.
Supporting ‘learning in context’. Industry and enterprise clients want training designed in ways that suit their settings and needs.

Supporting performance support systems. With the use of technology and the speed of change, often formal training is deemed too slow or expensive. Semi-structured and informal workplace learning can and does fill much of this void. For example, large companies can design online systems to support the learning and performance when required, by providing step-by-step online help or support or redesigning the task to make formal training and learning redundant. (Mitchell et al. 2003, pp.30–31)

Svensson (2003) suggests that learning environments in enterprises increasingly will be a responsibility of line managers, who will also provide individual workers/learners with access to mentors. The most important factors for learning environments are as follows:

- work and the organisation of work
- an open culture for sharing information and knowledge through mentoring
- collaboration in teams and projects
- and networks that are face-to-face or conducted through ICT.

Stephenson (2001) examines a holistic approach to workbased learning, based on the concepts of individual and corporate capability. He argues that capable individuals, and the organisations within which they work, have a mutual interest in continuous development within changing environments which can best be served by a shared commitment to autonomous learning (p.86). However, Stephenson finds that the ideal of a holistic approach to workbased learning presents many difficulties:

The implications of giving learners greater responsibility for their learning through work, and providing the necessary support for them to do it well, require teachers, line managers and external agencies to adjust the way they operate and the services they offer. (p.100)

**JUDGING THE NEEDS OF INDUSTRY CLIENTS**

Why and how enterprises use the nationally recognised type of training is examined by Smith, Pickersgill, Smith and Rushbrook (2005). They find that an enterprise’s decision to engage in recognised training is not made lightly and decisions are made afresh each time a new training need arises. Successfully embedding training in enterprises involves a three-phase process – engagement, extension and integration. In most cases, it is dependent on positive initial engagement; extension of training through a ‘VET evangelist’ who ‘sells’ the benefits of recognised training and persuades management; and, integration of competency standards associated with recognised training into many human resource processes.

Boud (2003) suggests that educators at the interface of education and work must look to the practices of work, and not attempt to force industry-based learners into a conventional educational view of the world (see also Harris, Simons and Moore 2005). But what educators do at the interface between educational institutions and workplaces will change substantially and there are and will be even more changes in practices in work involving new kinds of training practitioners.

An appreciation of different work experiences will have an impact on VET pedagogy, argues Griffiths (2003), who identifies different models of work experience:

- the traditional model of work experience involves launching students into the world of work
- the generic model provides an opportunity for key skill assessment
- the work process model involves assisting students in attuning to the context of work
- and the connective model involves seeing work experience as a form of reflexive learning.

Given these different models of work experience, Griffiths (2003) suggests that increasingly the connective model of pedagogy and learning in workbased contexts should be developed. Businesses, educational and vocational institutions should respond by using and developing the connective model of learning through work experience by connecting formal and informal contexts of learning. These institutions can also provide mediation between formal and informal contexts of learning to achieve an effective relationship between institutional learning and workplace learning developed in a partnership between teachers and workplace trainers.
**SUMMARY OF PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS**

In summary, VET practitioners need to make numerous judgments about teaching and learning, including:

- how to customise and personalise training
- how to analyse an individual’s learning styles and preferences
- how to understand – as a teacher/trainer – one’s own approach to learning styles
- how to support different learner groups such as learners in the online learning environment
- how to provide learning in many different ways in workplaces, especially when the training only occurs on-the-job and often in an informal manner
- how to develop partnerships between external teachers and enterprise based managers and trainers, to address the needs of both the employer and the employee.

This brief paper demonstrates that the environment in which VET practitioners operate is becoming increasingly complex, requiring finer and more subtle judgments by practitioners, in a multitude of ways.

**References**


If you are interested in conducting a program of professional development on the topic of Professional Judgment in VET a range of materials developed for the Reframing the Future forums are available also from the Reframing the Future website http://reframingthefuture.net/NOWO_05a.html
Some selected materials are on the CD ROM Professional Judgment in VET a set of resources also available from the website http://reframingthefuture.net/Publications.asp
Professional Judgment in Vocational Education and Training: A Set of Resources

Suzy McKenna and Dr John Mitchell