Introduction

It is widely recognized that there is a need to re-examine how we will work and learn in vocational and technical education (VTE) in the knowledge era. The environment in which we work and learn is dynamic and constantly shifting and the impact occurs at all levels - national, state and local including the point of delivery and individual level. As structures, policies and everyday work practices change, the VTE workforce vies to keep current in frequently turbulent times. Jobs are regularly redefined, restructured or lost, requiring a re-examination by people of their priorities, goals, outcomes and positioning within organisations. Every industry is facing changes and VTE is no exception. The challenge is to not destroy the old, but to build on and transcend its strengths with new models, thinking, approaches and strategies that will work more effectively in the knowledge era.

The research project

The TAFE NSW International Centre for Teaching and Learning (ICVET) established a partnership with the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) and subsequently the Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to research the design for professional development in the knowledge era.

The researchers are from TAFE NSW ICVET (International Centre for VET Teaching and Learning) and they have been informed and advised by a Working Group of national and international researchers, as well as a National Reference Group that comprises representatives from states and territories. The National Reference Group is chaired by the Institute Director – TAFE NSW Illawarra Institute.

The aim of the research is to improve the capacity of VTE providers to offer more flexible, risk-taking and client-focused approaches to learning and teaching. The emphasis is on the quality of provision through the development of capability within the VTE sector. Learners need career pathways, new skills and knowledge for work, which enhances their employability and assists learning throughout life (Shaping our Future: Australia’s National Strategy for vocational education and training 2004 – 2010). Professional development can significantly contribute to these national objectives through the ongoing development of the knowledge, skills and attributes of the VTE workforce.

The research project has been identified in the national Training Package Workplan as a key strategy for the vocational and technical sector. Specifically, it is referred to in Outcome 10 as Action 3:
Outcome 10: Strategies have been developed to strengthen teaching, learning and assessment.
Action 3: Development of new models of professional development to support practitioners in the Knowledge Era – in partnership with NSW.

The outputs of the research have included a new model for learning and development, as well as identifying emerging strategies, guiding principles and enablers to assist in better integrating professional development within organizations. The research identified values that are emerging as fundamental to living and working in the knowledge era, values that are needing to be reclaimed in the workplace. Significant amongst these values are trust, generosity, collaboration, humility, openness and tolerance. Values are seen as a key feature of any culture. The attributes of values that have been recognized in the research include the need for developmental values as well as values for ‘end results’ such as goals, and a balance between the two.

The target group for the research includes both managers as they support new directions in capability development of the VTE workforce and individuals and groups seeking to undertake strategies and approaches new to capability development in VTE.

Methodology

The intent was to research into the lived experience, hopes and strategic possibilities for the future in VTE. The research sought to further explore and build on the findings of the previous research project “Working and Learning in VET in the Knowledge Era” and the primary focus became an in-depth examination of new models and strategies for professional development within a business framework.

The initial focus was on the generation of a comprehensive search of literature and knowledge gathering. Not only texts, but journals, the web and communities such as Appreciative Inquiry Commons and Positive Psychology Centre were examined. Information was gathered and analysed for emerging patterns and themes. The views of practitioners in areas such as organisational development, human resources, education and training, learning and development and planning and policy were valued and taken note of. In addition, the researchers had access to a multiplicity of ideas and theories and multiple scholarly interpretations from members of their Working Group, research associates and those who wrote think pieces for the project. Research of this type records and seeks to make sense of lives lived, life experience and life as told. The qualitative research approach was preferred as it supported a focus on the context and testing out with practitioners in the field through their stories and data that they provided. Methodologies included phenomenology, hermeneutics and dialogue and a brief characterisation/description follows.

A phenomenological approach

Phenomenology belongs to a group of qualitative research approaches that “examine how human beings construct and give meaning to their actions in concrete social situations” (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994, p 204). As described by Denzin and Lincoln: “All knowledge is always local, situated in a local culture and embedded in organisational sites”. Janice Morse in Denzin and Lincoln (1994, p. 220) suggests the aim of phenomenological approach is to use questions that elicit the essence of experiences.

In the research, over 100 individuals within the VTE sector addressed a range of questions through an appreciative inquiry approach. Data was collected, synthesized, analysed and emerging themes were identified. The research also examined a range of case studies that exemplified the findings of the research and through which, people told their own stories. In applying a phenomenological methodology, the main focus was on the lived experience of individuals who described and shared their stories, understanding, hopes and dreams.

Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics is an interpretative paradigm (Atkinson P and Hammersley Martyn, 1994). It is a way of interpreting and making meaning of our research with others and re-checking our own interpretation against those meanings (Robottom and Hart, 1993). Throughout the research there was continual re-
examination and critique of the data through continual cycles of inquiry, with the subsequent development of new levels of understanding. Through cycles of inquiry with different groups and individuals, the researchers sought to discover a way forward to a new approach to professional development. Following extensive literature searches and reviews, data and findings were regularly presented for critique to the Working Group, Reference Group, national forums and workshops. With each cycle, new understandings emerged, the findings expanded and explanations became more substantial. At times, think pieces were commissioned to inform the discussion and findings and became part of the iterative process of research.

Dialogue

Dialogue was used as a way of working towards new levels of creativity and understanding throughout the research process. Dialogue can be defined as “meaning passing through or flowing between the participants” (Bohm and Edwards, 1991, p177) and can be distinguished from discussion where the aim is for one person’s viewpoint to prevail and to ‘win’. Dialogue allows the deeper issues to emerge and to be discussed, rather than staying with the surface issues. It can be viewed as “really talking” (Mary Belenky et al, 1986, p144) where people join together to arrive at some new understanding, rather than focusing on didactic talk. “Really talking” requires careful listening and reaches deep into the experience of each person and draws on the analytical abilities of each. Throughout the research, dialogue was facilitated between different representatives of ideas and concepts, in a manner that aimed at resolution. Representatives from all parts of the VTE sector were involved. The dialogue involved in-depth critique, examination from many perspectives and an iterative process through which new levels of understanding were reached and new theories were formed.

Three action planning forums were held across Australia and the learning from the forums was incorporated into the final research document. Informing the research in its latter phase were ‘think pieces’ commissioned by TAFE NSW ICVET.

Key Concepts

Four key concepts were identified as highly relevant to capability development in VTE. These are:

- Knowledge era – the environment
- Learning ecologies – the metaphor
- Strength based philosophy – the mind set
- Business wisdom – the actions

Knowledge era – the environment

The context for the research project is the knowledge era which is characterised by complexity, rapid movement, turbulence, contradictions and multiple priorities. It is also characterised by a great amount of energy, excitement, opportunity and creativity. It is an ‘intangible era’ where the growing economic commodity is knowledge itself more so than goods and services. Who and how we know becomes more important than what we know. It is not just about accessing information but about how we learn to continually select, borrow, interpret, share, contextualise, generate and apply knowledge to our work. Relationships become as important as systems and processes.

We need contemporary and meaningful ways to make sense of how to best work, learn and live effectively in these complex, diverse, unpredictable, challenging, opportunistic and irritating times. The knowledge era is disrupting our thinking, our relationships and our work practices and we must adapt to it to survive.

Learning ecologies – the metaphor

A new metaphor is emerging. It involves a shift from the ‘networks’ metaphor to a ‘learning ecologies’ metaphor. Learning ecologies is a useful symbol as it is familiar to us in terms of the importance of our relationship to the environment, the holistic view that it incorporates and the underlying
interconnectedness of all living things. Yet it is complex enough to fit the uncertain, self organising and emergent nature of the knowledge era.

The learning ecologies metaphor links our lived experience and our humanness to our environment and work context. It focuses on our need to continually adapt and to be resilient to thrive in changing work contexts. It incorporates the need to constantly work with contradictions and paradoxes and to create space for:

- imagination and intuition and logic and reason
- a design mind set and a problem solving mind set
- conversations and face to face events and the virtual.

Learning ecologies are dynamic, adaptive and diverse. From an exploration of these dimensions of this key metaphor, the research claims that the learning ecologies metaphor offers capability development in VTE freedom from seeking out the one way to get it right or the solution. More importantly, the learning ecologies metaphor draws our attention to a way of looking at the world that is intuitive, caring and responsible.

**Strength based philosophy – the mind set**

Compatible with the transition to the Knowledge Era are organisational change processes that move away from familiar deficit models which identify what is wrong before proceeding to ‘fix it’ intervention strategies. Most of our planning approaches are based on these models which are a legacy of the industrial era. They are currently the dominant model for learning and development. The new emerging paradigm for organisational change is based on asset or strength based approaches for individual and organisational growth and change. Essentially, these approaches are more holistic and focus on collaboratively identifying what's right and working well and then investing in amplification.

**Business wisdom – the actions**

Business wisdom is built on the principles and practices of organisational learning and knowledge management and is about the linking and leveraging based on knowledge, intelligence and experience sets within a business. It is about how these work together to promote learning and wisdom. Wise thinking and wise actions are the glue that connects the different elements of a learning organisation into a more integrated and productive whole, strengthening what is already working. The research advocates that a focus on business wisdom is particularly relevant to capability development in the knowledge era as it affirms the central role of human development, life management and striving to be the best that we can be for the benefit of others and ourselves.

**Linking concepts to contemporary work environments – invited contributions**

The research was informed by a series of think pieces commissioned by TAFE NSW ICVET. The authors were briefed by the research team and the papers are:

Richard Slaughter (2005), *Emerging paradigms in the knowledge era*, TAFE NSW ICVET

Richard Hall (2006), *Workplace changes: change and continuity in the workplaces of the future*, TAFE NSW ICVET

Avril Henry (2006), *The changing face of the workforce and intergenerational impacts*, TAFE NSW ICVET

Robert K. Critchley (2006), *The ageing workforce – to rewire or rust*, TAFE NSW ICVET

William & Debra Miller (2006), *Wisdom leadership: exploring its relation to spirituality*, TAFE NSW ICVET

These papers can be accessed from the ICVET website [www.icvet.edu.au](http://www.icvet.edu.au). They have been compiled into a publication called “Voices: Contemporary thinking for working and learning in the knowledge era”.
Key Findings

This Research Project has produced three key findings. These findings are:

1. Capability development is the new emphasis for working and learning in VTE
2. A strength-based orientation to capability development is most effective for change
3. Life-based learning is a contemporary framework for capability development in VTE

These findings have been developed into a model for capability development in VTE:

**Emphasising capability development**

The research identified a need to move beyond the terminology of professional development which was seen by informants to the Project as being restrictive. Capability development was accepted as being more aligned with the discourse emerging from this research. Capability development reclaims the importance of people and the human aspect, as well as reinforcing the importance of business imperatives. The focus is on the capacity of individuals, groups and organisations to engage in all aspects of their business, including technical and ICT, relationship building, structures and systems, skills and resources, culture, leadership and values, and re-development. To do this, capability development needs to support people in being confident, capable, connected, curious and committed learners, who interact with their environments so that they are in dynamic balance between life and work and who take effective and appropriate actions at work.

Capability development results in people learning to interact in dynamic balance with the various environments in which they live and work, so that they can fulfill their potential, expand their work challenges, take responsibility for their choices and contribute to sustainability, relationship building and resilience within their organisations.

**Strength based orientation**

A strength-based orientation to capability development does not disregard or displace existing practice because its premise is we take the best with us and integrate it into the new. Strength-based approaches displace nothing that has gone before – from an ecological perspective, if established practices are fit enough to adapt to the changing environment they will survive. They will stand and fall on their ability to adapt.

Many established strategies are already strength-based. The opportunity is to build more mindfully on those strengths. Depending on the baseline practice, this could be a fine adjustment or a significant shift. The advantage of building on established practices is their familiarity and immediacy. With
familiar strategies, the investment is not in learning something new, but in deciding to do something new—shifting the orientation to reinforce a strength base approach.

While established strategies could be ‘refreshed’ by an emphasis on strength, a range of strength-based approaches have been specifically designed from a strength based orientation and are rapidly gaining recognition. These strategies include, but are not limited to conversations, appreciative inquiry, talent management, disruptive technologies and positive deviance. They are part of a diverse approach to capability development in the knowledge era.

**Life based learning**

Life based learning has been informed by key concepts such as learning ecologies, strength based approaches to change, the knowledge era, ‘think pieces’ on the contemporary workplace and feedback from VTE practitioners.

What life based learning proposes is that learning for work is not restricted to learning at work. The premise underpinning life based learning is that all learning is interrelated, so it is not easy to separate learning at work from the other types of learning adults do. Learning is a multi-dimensional experience, and adults engage in a lot of learning other than professional development and much of this ‘extra-curricula’ learning influences our thinking and our work practices. Life based learning acknowledges multiple sources of learning which opens up opportunities for developing capability. The challenge is how to recognise, capture, support and utilise this more open-ended approach for the benefit of both the individual and the organisation.

Life based learning integrates and progresses two dominant models that have influenced the design of professional learning in VTE – the expert centred model and the work based learning model. In the expert centred model the ‘teacher’ is the holder and imparter of knowledge. The work based learning model is project focused, where learning is facilitated and knowledge is constructed through processes such as action learning. Both models have informed much of professional development methodologies to date.

Life based learning substantially shifts the discourse about professional development by moving beyond the allegiance to work based and expert centred learning. However, rather than abandoning these familiar and well served models to ‘the next big thing’, life based learning honours their legacy, retains what works and draws out their potentiality by placing them into a more contemporary framework. This allows a pathway for growth.
The life based learning model has a number of key characteristics that provide a unique contribution to progressing capability development in VTE. The deliberate focus on characteristics rather than strategies recognises that individuals, groups and organisations will make their own judgements and decisions about how to proceed with embedding new ways of working, learning and knowing within their organization. What the characteristics provide is a base from which these judgements and decisions can be made. The following list highlights the key characteristics of life based learning:

1. Emphasises capability development
2. Promotes a strength-based orientation to learning
3. Recognises multiple sources of learning
4. Balances integrity and utility
5. Shifts responsibility for learning to the individual
6. Shifts the role of organisations to that of enabler
7. Acknowledges that contradictions are strengths
8. Invests in developing the whole person
9. Acknowledges human dispositions as critical
10. Appreciates that change is qualitatively different

While the ten key characteristics of life based learning are described in list form to provide a clear overview of what each entails, it must be emphasised that their true strength is in their relationship as an interconnected whole and not as discrete units.

Embracing the best of expert centred learning and work based learning, life based learning offers a broader repertoire, expands the potential of existing models, offers new possibilities and articulates explicitly what many VTE practitioners are intuitively engaging with already. In doing so, it better serves the needs of working and learning in the dynamic VTE environment.

Application

Guiding principles have been identified for the application of a life based learning model in the workplace. These are:

- Believe relationships really matter
- Work with strengths
- Be reflexive as well as reflective
- Think and act wisely
- Acknowledge the whole person
- Move beyond professional development as an activity.

Further, a number of organisational enablers have been identified by the research. These are:

- Valuing connections and networks
- Developing a culture that supports job reshaping for personal growth
- Creating space for exchange and sharing of ideas (informal learning)
- Supporting the learner as designer of their own development
- Balancing control and creativity
- Modelling wise leadership
- Capitalising on the benefits of an intergenerational workforce
- Focusing on futures in education.

The researchers have explored application details of strength based approaches to capability development within a life based learning model. Here the focus is on emerging approaches. Application details are fleshed out for conversations, talent management, positive deviance, appreciative enquiry and disruptive technology.
The research concludes with an examination of evaluation for capability development in the Knowledge Era noting that an evaluative process for capability development in the knowledge era is full of paradoxes and questions. Importantly, if evaluation, in general seeks to establish the value or worth of an activity or program, then is it possible to evaluate capability development using traditional approaches?

The research indicates that capability development, as an innovation, demands fresh and distinctly different approaches to evaluation. Two approaches to evaluation are canvassed: Appreciative Inquiry Approach to Evaluation and Most Significant Change (MSC) Technique. These evaluative approaches take into account simultaneous development on multiple levels while recognising multiple stakeholders (organisation, team, the individual) each of whom will have different expectations of evaluation and use evaluation measures in different ways.

Concluding remarks

The researchers believe that life based learning offers a way forward at a time when many industrial era processes are no longer working. It opens the way to re-energising people, honouring what has worked well in the past and realigning current and emerging strategies to a strength based orientation.

The potential of life based learning has been summed up by a national forum participant as:

Life based learning seems initially a utopian/fantasy notion, but we live in a complex world. The notion is an honest attempt to capture the full breadth of our humanity, and apply it to our working life. I associate the idea of life based learning with my reading of classical studies and science fiction, where writers deal with the possible and not the absurd. The possibility that humanity can set out to explore the stars.

Life based learning articulates what many people know and feel. It provides a framework for application to capability development in the VTE sector.

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The final research report is titled: Life based learning: a strength based approach to capability development in vocational and technical education

A companion document to the research report will be out shortly and will be titled: A business approach to capability development: considerations and suggestions for applying life based learning in the workplace

Both reports will be available on the TAFE NSW ICVET website www.icvet.edu.au

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