Teachers Connecting With Research About Work Based Learning

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A collaborative project of
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Abstract

This presentation reports on an ongoing initiative in the North Coast Institute (NCI) to bridge the gap between learning theory/research and teaching practice. Building on a Reframing the Future project in 2004, the NCI collaborated with Southern Cross University to encourage teachers to access, read, evaluate and apply selections from the growing body of relevant literature around work based learning.

The aims of this project were threefold:

- to identify the most relevant and useful research literature
- to present it in accessible ways that invite engagement
- to investigate which strategies work for teachers to evaluate and use the material to support teaching and learning.

In sharing the findings of this initiative, it is hoped to trigger discussion among delegates about strategies that they have used/could use to encourage teachers to connect with research findings that will enhance teaching, learning and assessment practice.
Introduction

This paper focuses on the second phase of an initiative on the North Coast aimed at encouraging TAFE teachers to engage with research literature that is relevant to their teaching, learning and assessment practices. There is a growing body of theory and practice that has been termed ‘VET pedagogy’ and this project was designed to bring a selection of that material to busy practitioners in a format that they would find easy to access.

Background

The current project drew on the experience of the ANTA ‘Blue Sky’ initiative of 2002 which generated much enthusiasm among teachers. The Blue Sky success could be attributed to two significant features: the ‘Think Piece’ format whereby new ideas were presented in a short, accessible article; and the opportunity for practitioners to engage in ‘professional conversations’ about educational issues. More recently, Canberra Institute of Technology and the North Coast Institute formed a partnership, with support from a Reframing the Future project, to investigate:

- how to identify the literature of most help to teachers
- how to present it in ways that invite engagement, and
- what strategies work for teachers to evaluate and use the material to support teaching and learning.

The study resulted in several key findings. First, teachers have very little time to spend on seeking out or reading research material. Second, they are more likely to respond if the material addresses their particular pedagogical challenges and interests. Third, they do welcome the opportunity to discuss educational issues. Fourth, the material needs to be brief and expressed in reader-friendly language. Finally, it is helpful for the material to include models and strategies of a practical nature.

The North Coast Institute was keen to build on the momentum generated by the Reframing project and wanted also to develop a collaborative relationship with Southern Cross University. After consideration of several themes, the cross-sectoral steering group identified work-based learning (WBL) as the focus for a fresh initiative.

The aims of the project were threefold:

- to identify the most relevant and useful research literature associated with WBL
- to present it in accessible ways that invite engagement
- to investigate which strategies work for teachers to evaluate and use the material to support teaching and learning.
Methodology

An email invitation was broadcast across the North Coast Institute of TAFE (NCI) and about 80 teachers/lecturers indicated they wished to be involved in the project. A distribution list was formulated and individuals were emailed 10 “Think Pieces” (TP) over a 12-week period. The TP were developed from the following articles:


Eighteen individuals responded to the TP, either by email or posting a comment on the Community Zero Website. Emails were sent to those who had responded to TP inviting them to contribute feedback regarding the initiative. Nine participants responded and consented to a telephone interview. These interviews were conducted during August 2005 ranging from 12 to 25 minutes. The interview schedule can be seen as Appendix A.

There were six female and three male participants, all between 40 and 59 years of age. The length of service with TAFE spanned 3 years to 21 years with a fairly even spread across the years of service range. There were five participants in full time positions and four in part time positions. The sample was drawn from seven different campuses of NCI and the teaching background of the participants included the following areas: retail; commercial cookery & catering; business management; English for speakers of other languages; communication, literacy & numeracy; information technology; children’s services, disability & community services; and library management.

Key themes

All of the nine participants were keen to be involved and all highlighted professional development as being the key reason for their interest. They believed it was important to read current material concerning work-based learning and be “connected with the dissemination of research”. There was a strong belief that being involved would be very beneficial to the participants’ work. They talked about keeping up with changes in the
workplace and pedagogy. Seven of the participants became involved in the initiative to promote personal growth, and a common motivation was enjoyment of learning. Being interested in communities of practice was a significant influence for five teachers. Decreasing the isolation of working in a rural setting influenced three participants’ involvement. One said he became involved partly because he knew the articles selected for the TP would be of a high quality and generate interesting ideas. Most of the participants mentioned the possibility of saving of time and the convenience of the initiative. Teachers being rushed and having time constraints were frequently mentioned. Six participants became involved because the initiative presented annotations of research articles that were well summarised and quick to read. Four of the teachers believed that the accessing of TP via email was an easy process.

The majority of the respondents said more than one TP was equally beneficial for them. Eight of the pieces attracted more than one vote. The TP entitled ‘Critiquing workplace learning discourse: Participation and continuity at work’ by Billett (2001) was nominated by three participants as having the most benefit. Two respondents nominated the TP that concerned 'Situated learning: Researching the convergence of formal with informal learning' by Down (2002). The piece about 'Vocational Knowledge and its specification' by Stevenson (2001) was particularly beneficial for two of the interviewees. Two people voted the TP based on 'Modelling the invisible: The pedagogy of craft apprenticeship' by Gamble (2001) as the most useful. Two participants were very interested in the content of the TP that concerned ‘The real world of work’ by Whyte (2002).

All of the respondents valued the initiative because it increased their awareness and insight of current research related to their workplace. The benefits of participating in a professional development initiative were emphasised. Many of the participants talked about gaining new and insightful ways of considering teaching and learning. The majority mentioned the benefits of linking theory and practice, with comments concerning the practical nature of much of the TP content.

The majority of participants valued the format of the two page TPs, the full bibliographic details, annotation length and questions posed for further thought. Six appreciated the length of the TP and highlighted their general lack of time to engage with written material and research articles that were lengthy. Eight respondents made positive comments about the TPs being well set out and reader friendly. The summaries of the articles were described as well written, succinct, and time saving. However three participants mentioned that they also accessed and read the full articles or used the annotation as a “good starting point”.

Not many responded formally to all the questions following each TP but most said they valued the stimulation of further thought. Many participants enjoyed being able to participate if they wished, with no pressure to do so. Several saved and printed the TPs to read at a later date when convenient. Five participants commented that the TPs were sent too quickly and that they needed more time to engage in each TP and respond. A few suggested that sending one TP every three weeks would be helpful, as would avoiding the busy beginning and end of semester. Others made mention of problems accessing the material. One teacher said she did not have an Internet connection at home and shared one computer between five colleagues at work. As a result she could not access the TPs freely.

Only a few teachers said that limited time in their working day impacted on their participation. However time may have been a significant issue for some, as only five of the group read all of the TPs and the majority responded three or fewer times. Two of the respondents talked about being a bit isolated: “It was a bit difficult to respond. Issues were stimulated and I actually wanted to talk about the article. Not always easy to write responses. There was no
immediate feedback like with conversation." One person expressed disappointment with the lack of participation in the Community Zero Website and thought that this was related to issues with time and some individuals perhaps feeling intimidated or unsure of accessing a new Website.
Conclusion

The participants all rated the initiative highly. In particular they commented on the overall professional development value, especially when the material was seen as relevant to their own teaching role. While the format and readability of the pieces were evaluated favourably, the pace and timing of their distribution was more problematic, with some participants expressing a preference for a longer interval between ‘postings’.

Facilitating an interactive community of practice remains a challenge. Email was found to be overwhelmingly more popular than the online Community Zero forum. It seems that the additional skills and effort required to access the online forum discouraged many participants from responding. Significantly, some participants commented on their wish to talk about the pieces and to receive feedback, rather than simply to write a response. This response strongly suggests the need to set up opportunities for face-to-face discussion.
References

Australian National Training Authority, (2002), *Knowledge builders: Fresh thinking about learning and learners*, NCVER, South Australia.


