From the Outside In.

Transforming Education through Industry Liaison

A case study of two Industry Liaison officers in two Australian Technical Colleges .

By

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Abstract

Government policy across Australia has looked to developing effective partnerships between schools and workplaces as a strategy to engage young people in 'hands-on' learning. The rapid growth of Vocational Education and Training in schools and other youth education settings has placed particular emphasis on the need for partnerships that engage 15 to 19 year old students in workplace learning and their development of employability skills. This policy direction has required schools and industry to interact more cooperatively and created new roles in schools for industry liaison personnel to develop and manage effective partnerships between schools and their industry partners. In this paper the author reflects on her role as an industry liaison officer working in a medium sized school in regional Victoria. It presents two case studies of school industry partnership initiatives and explore the opportunities for learning created by these. The paper draws on the following key questions: how are partnerships being used to prepare students for life beyond school; how are anticipated learning outcomes being measured, and what challenges are being confronted by the role of the industry liaison officer. The author discusses how doing partnership work requires the facilitation of mutual understandings between school and industry. While partnerships create opportunities for young people to assemble new learning from these two different settings, the experience of transcending different institutional cultures can be challenging for students educators and industry partners. The author concludes by discussing how the school industry partnerships outlined in this paper have required changes in the way both the school and industry partners work.

Introduction

For authentic pedagogy, both students and teachers in the 21st century, require the fresh air of the world outside to invade the classroom, and the classroom to move out to engage with its community.(Bentley 1998). If, as the Australian government requires, educators will meaningfully retain 90% of all students to year 12 by 2015, (MCEETYA 2008), then there is an imperative for schools to make learning relevant to their students' lives beyond the school gates. The modern response of senior secondary education in Australia to the challenge of inviting industry in, started in the 1990s with the introduction of the Vocational Education and Training in Schools programme (VETIS). In response to the Kirby report of 1992, (Kirby 2000) the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) was piloted in 16 Victorian schools with an enrolment of 546 students. By 2008, 15,641 Victorian students were enrolled in VCAL with 423 providers. VETIS has achieved a similar explosion of support. 57, 989 students undertook a VET program in 599 training settings, of these 8,506 students were school based apprentices or trainees. ((VCAA 2009).

Context

The Australian Technical Colleges (ATCs) were established by the Federal government from 2006, to address skill shortages across the nation, and to give traditional trades a voice in the preparation of their future workforce. (Langdon 2007) . The ATC model addresses four main issues : the globalisation of the workforce, national trade skills shortages, youth learning engagement and school reform by providing:

- Integrated Senior Secondary Training, Certificate III Trade training and workplace placements calendar
- An applied learning pedagogy
- A personal work readiness program
- A school community with a focus on supporting the transition from school to work.
- An Australian School Based Apprenticeship or Structured Work place Learning placement for each student, in local skills shortage industries.
- Industry Liaison Officers (ILOs) on staff whose focus is to establish and maintain links between employers ,the curriculum, the student apprentices, their families and their workplaces.

As an industry liaison practitioner I have come to education from the outside in. Between 2000 and 2007 I worked with Hand Brake Turn, an automotive training organisation for disadvantaged youth, as an industry liaison officer. For the past three years I have been the Industry Liaison Officer at a regional Australian Technical

College. Within both my ILO roles, the organisations for which I worked consider the Industry Liaison Officer pivotal to the successful creation of pathways to employment for course graduates. (Concern 2009; DEEWR 2009).

Due to the 2008 change in the Federal Government from Liberal to Labour, the 25 Australian Technical Colleges are no longer be a Federal initiative, and are currently being transitioned into state funding. This has placed even more pressure on the model.(Langdon 2007) At the time of this paper some colleges have not yet firmed up their funding arrangements, and those who have transitioned to state funding have experienced substantial changes.(Gillard 2009). As the colleges consolidate their progress and shore up their futures, it appears an opportune time to research the partnership learning achieved by the ATC Industry Liaison Officers who have been at the fore front of the largest education initiative in Australia's last 20 years (DEEWR 2009).

Literature

This paper is informed by literature drawn from the sociocultural education tradition (Wright Mills 1959; Nespor 1994), influenced by the constructivist perspective (Dewey 1929) . It follows the concept of social learning systems (Broudy 1977) and communities of practice(Lave and Wenger 1991) with a particular focus on the transformation of educational structure and practice which results when schools actively invite their community in, through collaborative partnerships, to respond to global pressures including skills shortages.

Theorists like Pierre Biourdieu(1977), and Robert Putnam(2000) have identified constructing social capital as an essential means of assembling assets and resources for individuals and drawn the link between community participation and improved school performance. Billett and Seddon(2004) advise that an applied learning pedagogy, requires educational professionals to create and maintain community and business partnerships, to build social capital. This paper extends that imperative to the concept of industrial capital.

Case studies

This research of two ILO cases, is conducted in the multi – site case study tradition (Stenhouse 1975). It is a qualitative participatory research, in the constructionist social world view, where the participants are 'active constructors of the knowledge rather than passive consumers (Abdal-Haqq 1995) . The subjects of the case study are two Industry Liaison Officers who have designed and established their roles over three years from 2006 to 2009, and are daily refining them through practice. Practitioner research has the advantage of relevance and immediacy, (Connell and Campbell 2007).

The research aims to examine the role of the Industry Liaison Officer framed by the following perimeters(ACER October 2008)

1. How are the partnerships being used to prepare students for life beyond school?
2. How have the partnerships facilitated mutual understanding between the ATC and industry?
3. What opportunities have been afforded for young people to assemble new learning from three different learning settings: the workplace, school and trade school?
4. What professional development challenges are being confronted by the role of the industry liaison officer?
5. What implications are there in the ILO practice for other educational settings?

The Data:

Martin **** (name and details have been changed to protect anonymity)***

Overview: This case relates how Martin's view of himself as a translator between conflicting cultures impacts on the way he fills the Industry Liaison Role.

In linking schools and industry, Martin sees his role as a translator. He has learned to be comfortable in three cultures, and fluent in three languages: industry, education and the language of young people, so that he can communicate with each cultural group, and then interpret across the groups to enable them to understand each other. Martin describes each of the three cultures as very different from each other and says these differences lead to misunderstanding, which he believes he can help alleviate.
"Employers are usually middle aged and can be uncomfortable telling young people exactly what they expect from them. They may also have been burned by bad experiences with apprentices who let them down, so they might be a bit hard on a young person. I listen to the employer and find out what they expect, what they are looking for , then I can prepare the young people to do well in their work placement.
Martin believes his year 11 and 12 students want to do well, but have little or no exposure to the trades, so need a solid preparation before they go out on the work site.
Martin uses the teachers and trade teachers to help him short list and prepare a suitable candidate for the opportunities he finds. He sees himself as a key part of the student's education team.
Martin trains his students to be young ambassadors for their trades
After the six weeks the students are sent out in teams to speak at other schools., community careers nights, and some as tour guides for the local TAFE. Martin sees this exercise as helping the students to assemble learning for themselves, and then draw from that

"What is taught in the classroom in literacy or numeracy should support what is learned at the work site, and in trade school, and should be valued in all three settings. That is my aim." Martin

bank of learning to inform their peers. Martin recognised the students were also building social capital for their school and trade school, within the local education community.
Martin sees the benefit of working closely with the class and trade teachers. "What is taught in the classroom in literacy or numeracy should support what is learned at the work site, and in trade school, and should be valued in all three settings. That is my aim." He regularly invites an industry reference group made up of his students' employers to meet with the teaching staff. They discuss questions like: 'What kind of maths do your apprentices need?' The employers tell him they value the opportunity to interact directly with education , which they have traditionally seen as failing to deliver the work readiness skills they needed in their young people.
" Our school's flexible applied learning approach means we can accommodate the employers' suggestions and be more responsive to the industry's needs."
In response to employers' feedback the literacy and numeracy competencies the school delivers have been tailored to suit each of the trades. After the meetings Martin encourages the students to take their employers on a tour of the school and to see the work they have been doing. At their request, employers are sent regular school reports on their apprentice, which the teachers find an effective motivating tool to encourage their students to engage. "The students value tasks they know are important to their employers, especially if they know the employers are monitoring their school progress!"
Martin also believes in the power of regular work place reports in educating and motivating his students. "I talk over the student's performance with the employer after every work placement and prepare a written report recording where the student needs to improve for next time."
Martin has a private interview with the student to give them the feedback and strategise how they are going to improve. "Sometimes it is just steady as she goes. But there might be a specific issue. Then we will plan a strategy together." Martin tries to facilitate the learning, not control it. He believes the student has unique understanding of his situation, and with effective mentoring can construct his own learning.
"If he owns it, he is more likely to learn from it."

Camilla * *(name and details have been changed to protect anonymity).*

Overview: This case records how Camilla uses an industry led education model to change attitudes among students and the local industrial community.

Camilla believes the Australian Technical School model has the potential to transform education.

" The ATC is a great concept for kids. There is a massive generation gap between students and their work places. The old school expects them to respect the principle of the thing! The new generation expects to be treated like one of the team. When it

doesn't happen it leads to conflict. The college can be middle ground." Camilla believes there is rich learning for education in what the ATC model has achieved, particularly in linking students to their future careers, and she sees the dedicated and specialised Industry Liaison role as crucial in establishing and managing successful industry/school partnerships to bridge the communication gap she observes. "So to have me on the ground, doing the work for them, basically finding the right kids, organising the work experience, getting the feedback, and once they are in, keeping the relationships open and on going, it's what industry needs ." Camilla is a natural communicator. She takes pride in good working relationships with her employers and with her students. Working in a small isolated rural community she says communication has been the key to her success, which she measures in the college's 80% apprenticeship outcomes and its strong student retention rates. Camilla relies on industry visits, cold calling and community links to establish relationships with individual employers which she uses to source work opportunities for her students. She loves her work. She says it is the best job she has ever had. " I mean I am not selling commodities. I am selling futures."

Camilla believes there are two significant aspects to her role which contribute to its success. The first is that the college delivers all three components of the student's education: senior secondary education, trade training and work placement which gives what she calls …"a holistic approach to everything out there in regards to training education and school based apprentices." Camilla values the enhanced quality control and risk management this model provides in the preparation of young people for life long learning. Because she can regularly confer with all members of the education team delivering the student's learning, Camilla can reduce the risk of sending the student into a placement for which he/she is not prepared or not suited.

The second key aspect Camilla values is the college's work readiness program. This intensive three month training happens when the students arrive, straight out of year 10 in a main stream high school setting and is designed to re program them to think like young apprentices, to think for themselves. "Basically when a student comes here through the process of their practical skills, OH & S, communication skills, programs that we run in those sorts of areas, even the way, that they learn, there is a lot of self onus for them to be able to push themselves, and deliver outcomes off their own batt. Even though there is a facilitator network all around them it's programming them to think for themselves, to be more assertive , to show initiative, all those sort of things, to use their communication skills which at a point when we feel that when they are work ready, we get them out to employers."

For Camilla the work readiness program gives her the opportunity to work in a team to prepare the young people for the opportunities she sources, and to have a confidence the young people have the skills they will need to well, before she sends them out.

"The feedback that we get from employers is that these kids (the ATC students) do know what they are doing out there . They are showing initiative. They have got some savvy ness about what they should be doing and from that they get their apprenticeships."

But, for all her research and preparation, Camilla recognises there will always be risky attitudes amongst young people. "But you do get your polished turds and you can't sell them. You get the kid who comes from a split family… and its always someone else's fault. …Then you've got the kid who lives with mum and dad. They've both got reasonable jobs. … There's plasma on every bloody wall. They want for nothing. They don't have any real understanding. They don't have any real energy to start to work your way up. That's where the expression comes from , you can't sell a polished turd. They know how to manipulate an adult." After about six months, Camilla observes, these attitudes catch up with them and they fall over in their placement. Camilla coaches these students by explaining that the apprenticeship career pathway they have chosen is like being recruited into the army. "You come in as a cadet. Then you move on to be an apprentice. It's got more of an obligation that you are signing up for, something that is not going to be that pretty. But you are going to get some big rewards for it when you are done. "

"The ATC is a great concept for kids. There is a massive generation gap between students and their work places. The old school expects them to respect the principle of the thing! The new generation expects to be treated like one of the team. When it doesn't happen it leads to conflict. The college can be middle ground. ." Camilla.

Analysis and Conclusion

The data shows that the Industry Liaison role provides a small but critical mass of experiential learning on the practicalities of engaging industry in collaborating with education to develop an industry needs responsive curriculum.(DEEWR 2009)

Creating partnerships between school and industry work has impacted on:

- Curriculum delivery and content. Inviting industry in to help develop better contextualised pedagogy has meant that industry has had to learn to understand education, both senior secondary and trade training, and the restrictions and opportunities inherent in these partner cultures.
- School calendars. As industry has communicated its requirements to education, through the ILO translator/intermediary , school has had to respond with calendar changes: timetabling of work placements, length of school day, and where education is delivered.
- Student engagement. Through raising awareness of 21st Century youth culture, education and industry have collaborated in enhancing student engagement with their senior secondary years, enabling the students to view their education as drawn holistically from various integrated settings
- Educator/mentors. Partnerships have changed the way the partners view themselves, drawing resources from the industrial capital surrounding the school, and enabling each partner's educator/mentor potential

The case study illustrates that inviting industry into an active role in education opens the door for complicated conversations across diverse cultures that traditionally speak

different languages. Through their translating role, The Industry Liaison Officers observe that due to industrial pressures including an aging work force, skill shortages, and frustration with the general lack of work readiness training in main stream education, industry is motivated to engage in the education partnership task. ILOs report on the creative processes they have developed to invite Industry in to work collaboratively with schools for mutual benefit. The difficulty lies not with the intent, the ILOs identify, but with the responsibility. The question they ask is, without their role, who will instigate these conversations? Will it be the teachers? Will it be industry leaders? Who will keep the partnership going when the key partners' core business: teaching a class or running a business, calls them away? Research tells us conversations between school and industry partners need to happen on many levels, but most significantly, within the individual school's community of practice. Government policy makers (Rudd and Smith 2007)and key industry groups may share common good will to educate and prepare the next generation for a life of education and training, but , the ILO case study participants ask, who will take this good will and create systems and processes, on the ground, to make it happen in the broader education context?

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