

Assessment Practices in an Applied Learning Context

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Abstract

Recent curricula developments in various Australian settings have emphasised the importance of learner-focused, performance-oriented and educative forms of assessment as part of new learning priorities. The links between curriculum, pedagogy and assessment are stressed in developments of this kind that seek to improve learner engagement through responsiveness to learner diversity and connectedness to the life-worlds of students. When there is a focus on applied learning in curricular and pedagogical systems how can assessment be constructed and practised in ways that reflect and respect an applied learning approach? This paper considers assessment practices employed in one component of the Graduate Diploma of Education in Applied Learning where a problem-solving approach sought to position learning, teaching and assessment as simultaneously 'applied' in a teacher education program.

Introduction

In this paper I will describe how understandings of applied learning influenced the design, implementation and reflective analysis of assessment practices within a course of study about youth cultures for applied learning teachers in preparation. In particular, I will attempt to show how the principles of an approach to applied learning proposed for Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning programs in Victoria can inform thinking and practice about assessment tasks that aim to provide learning for, in and about applied learning. Specific examples of how this was conducted and how students responded, both in terms of their assessment experiences and artefacts and in their reflection on the process will be presented. I will also endeavour to explain how the construction and experience of engaging with assessment tasks, as linked to course content and context, reflect the principles of an emerging community of practice for applied learning about youth cultures and learning pathways.

Applied Learning

The introduction in 2002 of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL) as an alternative post-compulsory education pathway and qualification in Victoria has highlighted the importance of applied learning as an approach to learning at all levels of education.

While it is difficult to pin down a definition of applied learning, the Victorian Curriculum Assessment Authority (VCAA) provides an insight into four "recurring themes" that inform policy and practice for VCAL. These are: the application of skills and knowledge to solving problems; making links between learning and the 'real world'; recognising and responding to learner difference and diversity; and assisting learners to make successful transitions and take responsibility for their learning as a part of that process (VCAA 2006, p.1).

It is worth noting that it is stressed that applied learning in VCAL does not equate to simply 'hands on' learning but that equal importance is placed on theory and application where "the theoretical understandings and knowledge required to complete a task will be drawn out from the context, which also provides the opportunity to use and apply what has been learnt" (VCAA 2006, p.1).

In developing some depth to this claim, a list of eight applied learning principles is provided. These are:

1. Start where learners are at.
2. Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
3. Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
4. Connect with communities and real life experiences.
5. Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
6. Integrate learning – the whole task and the whole person. In life we use a range of skills and knowledge. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks.
7. Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Everyone learns differently. Accept that different learning styles require different learning/teaching methods. But value experiential, practical and ‘hands on’ ways of learning.
8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best ‘fits’ the learning content and context.

(VCAA 2006, p.1)

While reflecting the four recurring themes in approaches to applied learning, these principles highlight the importance of curriculum flexibility, learner diversity, community connections and assessment practices. In this regard, there is much here that reflects a New Learning agenda (Australian Council of Deans of Education 2001) and recent developments in system views on curriculum and pedagogy; such as, for example, the New Basics and Productive Pedagogies in Queensland and the Victorian Essential Learning Standards and the Principles of Teaching and Learning P-12 in Victoria. But, as we would expect from reading Bernstein (1973), curriculum and pedagogy are interdependent with a third message system, that of assessment. And so, we see Rich Tasks in Queensland and the principles of assessment in Victoria as strategies for appropriately working assessment into the planning and implementation of new visions for curriculum and pedagogy.

Bernstein’s observation about the way the message systems sit together is important and Allan Luke (1999) has suggested that “we can fiddle with the curriculum ... we can work on our pedagogy ... but if our **assessment and reporting** pulls in a whole different direction ... we’ll just have a mess on our hands”. Others express the same sentiment (see Brady and Kennedy 2005).

Importantly, in considering the final of the eight principles for an applied learning approach – about assessment - we should be asking the question what does it mean to assess appropriately and which methods fit the content and context? The report of the 2002 VCAL trial (Henry et al. 2002) identified several critical factors that needed to be addressed for VCAL to be successfully adopted statewide. These included “the development of teaching approaches for secondary schools that are... a clear departure from the teacher-centred, expository, classroom-based pedagogies that are still very much

the norm in secondary schools [and for]... schools as more broadly based, inclusive and flexible learning and social environments for young people” (2002, p.5). As Bernstein and Luke’s observations would suggest, these factors cannot be simply regarded as pedagogical but are about assessment practices too. We may well conclude that applied learning assessment practices must be student-centred, flexible and inclusive, reflect the social dimensions of learning and not be only restricted to knowledge outcomes.

Following the trial, the Curriculum Planning Guide for VCAL units indicated that learning outcomes should be developed from programs that meet locally relevant content and context. This would include: integrated or project approaches; authentic tasks; single or multiple tasks; assessment methods that cater for individual needs of students (Victorian Qualifications Authority 2003, p.13). It goes on to state that “a range of assessment methods can be used to verify successful completion of the learning outcomes of each VCAL unit in the VCAL Learning Program” (VQA 2003, p.13). The list includes self-assessment, oral presentations, role-plays, folios, and performance of practical tasks among other things. There is recognition that a breadth of opportunity for demonstrating knowledge, skills and understandings in diverse and performative ways is required.

Assessment

Luke’s (1999) remarks stress the importance of assessment practices in making educational purposes and practices live up to their claims for enriched educational lives and the realisation of outcomes for more than just a privileged few learners. The poignancy in his words speaks from an experience that many have described, where assessment policies and practices do not fit well with policies and practices concerned with content, teaching and learning.

Often this is not because assessment is seen as unimportant, but more because it is significantly influenced by stakeholders who have an interest in practices that are best considered separately and after the teaching and learning event. The legacy of using assessment for measuring difference between students for diagnostic ‘input’ purposes and for ‘output’ sorting and selection remains a powerful determinant of what gets assessed, how it is done and when it occurs.

However, creative thinking about assessment has been written back onto the agenda. For example, Torrance (1995) suggests that “using assessment in educational reforms seems to be an idea whose time has come” (p.144) and that “improving the curriculum and teaching methods through improving assessment methods probably represents the most ambitious educational perspective on developments at the present time” (p.150).

Additionally, Weeden et al. (2002) claim that “assessment is probably the most profound influence on what gets learned, when learning occurs and who does the learning [and] ... that assessment FOR learning is probably the most neglected topic in the educational world, whether this is educational policy making, educational research or educational practice itself” (p.150).

The rise of discourses around authentic, educative and performance assessment (Wiggins 1998) reflect and inform the shift of assessment practices and priorities away from

auditing learning and towards assessment in support of learning through feedback of information about processes and outcomes to both students and their teachers. This is clearly evident in recent assessment advice for teachers in Victoria who are implementing the new Victorian Essential Learning Standards curriculum and the Principles of Teaching and Learning P-12.

Assessment practices can assist students to learn more effectively if they develop students' capacity to reflect on their learning, develop deeper understanding and cultivate higher order thinking skills. Assessment for improved student learning and deep understanding requires a range of assessment practices to be used with three overarching purposes:

- *Assessment for learning* occurs when teachers use inferences about student progress to inform their teaching.
- *Assessment as learning* occurs when students reflect on and monitor their progress to inform their future learning goals.
- *Assessment of learning* occurs when teachers use evidence of student learning to make judgements on student achievement against goals and standards.

(Department of Education & Training 2006)

These purposes work much better in linking Bernstein's three message systems and encourage a mixture of formative and summative assessments as informants for a range of audiences about student learning. Additionally, they encourage teachers to employ a range of strategies where students can demonstrate and perform their learning in ways that are respectful of diversity in learning styles. Increasing the diversity of approaches and timelines for assessment in turn leads to clearer explications of why, when and how assessments are conducted. Transparency, through explicit criteria, the use of rubrics, along with the use of self and peer assessment in educative ways can emphasise the role of assessment *for* learning and assessment *as* learning in the triumvirate. Weeden et al. (2002) see this kind of transition as a "shift in the centre of gravity" in assessment that is "the tip of an iceberg of change that during the twenty-first century will put the learner, rather than the teacher or the curriculum... at the heart of educational debates" (p.155). As they rather eloquently go on to say, "the 'secret garden' of assessment has kept learners in thrall for long enough" (p.155).

The question that needs to be put in this paper is: can these three overarching purposes inform the emerging developments around applied learning curriculum and pedagogies and be used appropriately to fit the learning content and context?

Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning)

In 2005, the Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) was offered for the first time as a teacher preparation program in the Faculty of Education at Deakin University. The program "is designed to prepare teachers and other educators to work with young people in secondary schools, TAFE and Adult and Community Education (ACE) where the challenge is to adequately provide young people with knowledge, skills and values for

a range of further study and employment pathways” (Deakin University 2005a). The program and its constituent studies were a response to Henry and Grundy (2004) when they asked “what would our teacher education courses look like if we were to break away from the strict adherence to the logic of subject specialisation, each with their own teaching method, and moved pedagogy to the position of a central study for teachers of post compulsory learners?” (p.29).

The program is structured to provide applied learning studies and teaching practicum focussed on the middle years and the post-compulsory years along with specialist studies in literacy, numeracy, partnerships, youth cultures and professional challenges for the twenty-first century (Deakin University 2005a). Students enrolled in the program are prepared to teach in specialist secondary teaching areas with applied and vocational learning orientations (Deakin University 2005a).

Youth Cultures and Learning Pathways

This unit within the Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) aimed to engage students with key youth cultural issues that impact upon the delivery of education, training and transition support for young people in contemporary society. It set out to enable students to:

- develop an understanding of key youth issues that impact upon the delivery of education and training and transitions into ‘adulthood’;
- become familiar with the influence of youth cultures on learner identities and participation in education and training;
- apply understandings of the key theoretical frameworks underpinning, and informing work with young people in educational settings;
- demonstrate a critical understanding of current policy and practice related to youth transitions and learning pathways;
- demonstrate a capacity to work with school and community based youth agencies, and;
- interpret links between theory and practice in a specific youth education setting (Deakin University 2005b)

In delivering this unit to prospective teachers aspiring to expertise in applied learning, the teaching team sought to adopt a problem-solving approach that would position learning, teaching and assessment as simultaneously ‘applied’ for these students in their teacher preparation. For the teaching team, our experience in working with other teachers, both those in preparation and those in graduate programs, along with our research interaction with at risk young people in secondary school and other education and training settings, told us a number of things (Shacklock et al. 2006). Firstly, that our content must be linked to contexts beyond our classroom, that our pedagogy must recognise the social situated-ness of learning and link competence with experience, and that assessment must be embedded, educative and performance oriented in order to fit well with the learning content and context.

Two assessment tasks were developed for the unit. They were: 1) a visual display and written reflection about engagement with a group of 15-19 year-olds in an applied

learning setting; youth cultures; and the education, training and transition needs of young people; and 2) a report examining an approach to learner engagement in an applied learning setting.

Assessment Practices in the Unit

In the first task, students were required to document their involvement with a group of young people aged between 15 and 19 years during their Applied Learning Teaching Experience (or practicum). This was to be presented to the student group as a visual display - for example a poster, a photographic display, a movie or an art-work – as part of a collective exhibition and discussion. A short written reflection was also required to complete the task. The visual display and written reflection were to focus on the development of insights into the links between youth cultures and the education, training and transition needs of young people.

Students were assessed on criteria that included: synthesis of evidence of involvement with young people, clarity and impact of the visual display; breadth and depth of communication in the representation; informed views on the presence and influence of youth cultures in the setting; and the identification of links between youth cultures and the education, training and transition needs of young people. Examples of how students responded to this task are shown below.

In the first example, we see text and image about youth lives, both collectively and individually, represented on transparent cylinders that can be moved, arranged and illuminated in different ways to provide perspective and emphasis that changes according to the direction from which the artefact is viewed. The student presenter talked about the experience of working with young people in an applied learning setting whilst student peers moved around the display artefact exchanging views and interpretations. A lively discussion about the selection of text and image for representing the experience of youth cultures ensued whilst the display was featured and later amongst smaller groups.



In the second example, we see a representation of the roller-coaster of youth lives with different pathways, breaks in the journey, sudden changes in direction, flat spots, and dangerous curves. The ride is annotated with signposts indicating education, training and transition needs while the presence and influence of youth cultures are



strategically shown underneath. Again, the student presenter talked about the experience of working with young people in that particular applied learning setting whilst student peers moved around the display artefact to find different perspectives and interpretations.

These and more than 30 other representations – including continuous Powerpoint loops and short movies - were displayed in a very large room. For set times, small numbers of presentations by students ran simultaneously allowing for small groups of students and



visitors to assemble at various displays and engage in discussion with the presenter and each other. Over the course of a day, all students made a presentation about their work and had opportunities to attend other presentations, to revisit displays and discuss the ideas and images represented at the exhibition. At the same time, students were able to reflect on how they, and their peers, used evidence to communicate their emerging knowledge of the role played by youth cultures in the education, training and transition needs of young people. Further discussion around the

learning from this assessment task took place in class and in online forums.

Reflections on the Assessment Practice

The Youth Cultures and Learning Pathways teaching team designed this problem-solving task as a way of positioning learning, teaching and assessment as simultaneously ‘applied’ within a teacher education program for teachers specialising in applied learning. The team took a view that an assessment practice of this kind reflects the four “recurring themes” that the VCAA (2006) describes as central to the conceptualisation of applied learning in the VCAL. In particular, it has allowed students to apply skills and knowledge to solve problems; to make links between their learning and the ‘real world’; to recognise and respond to their own and other’s learning styles; and to take responsibility for their own and other’s learning as a part of their engagement in the process of the task. In doing so, the task has drawn students into participation with ‘hands on’ practices that are an exemplar of what VCAL sets out to do. That is, where “the theoretical understandings and knowledge required to complete a task will be drawn out from the context, which also provides the opportunity to use and apply what has been learnt” (VCAA 2006, p.1).

As a teaching team, it has been our desire to bring assessment practices to the fore in decisions about curriculum and pedagogy and, in doing so, bring together the three message systems of education through content, teaching and learning, and assessment. Moreover, we have sought to ensure that the triumvirate of assessment for learning, assessment as learning, and assessment of learning are evident here. In focussing on assessment from the beginning, we would like to think that we have avoided the mess that Luke (1999) and others have lamented when assessment pulls in a different direction to curriculum and pedagogy.

The students have found it has created a tension between competence and experience that connects them in new ways to what they know and where it can be applied. Tom, an aspiring applied learning teacher with specialisations in metalwork arts found his emerging knowledge of youth cultures immediately useful.

In this course we had been talking about youth cultures, Goths and all that and I hadn't seen any of that as relevant. When I got home my son – eye shadow on, tears dripping down his face, we'd gone from nothing to Goth and I've been learning about it, so very timely. It made me not panic straight away about it happening, which I probably would have done a week earlier. So it's opened my eyes to those things. My wife and I discussed this because I don't know if I want my kids to muck up at high school or muck up when they leave high school. So, Den's mucking up with eyes, it's nothing at the end of the day.

Like Tom, Anna also recognised that her discursive apparatus for linking youth cultures and applied learning in different settings has expanded and that she can see things that were previously invisible.

When meeting youth cultures for the first time, I really struggled with the ideas because it's such a complicated topic, it's so layered and every setting is different. I can see that the youth cultures at HBT [a non-school training setting] and the youth cultures at Trafalgar Park [a school] are so different and it's complicated. If it was a simple problem we'd find a simple solution and we'd all live happily ever after. But, it's not like that and we have to learn to deal with it.

It's about doing applied learning and at HBT and Trafalgar Park even though these are the hardest kids that you're working with, there are lessons to be learned about engaging young people... that idea of tailoring education to suit the individual, rather than saying, 'you've got to fit this mould'. All young people are individuals and need to be assessed for their learning styles and the way that they learn and then tailor everything they do in a way that will engage them.

Communities of Practice

While it was not a part of the teaching team's original thinking when planning curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for the Youth Culture and Learning Pathways course, it appears that we have initiated conditions of inquiry, expertise and interaction to support an emerging community of practice for applied learning teachers that is about youth cultures and education, training and transitions needs of young people.

First linked to ideas about situated learning and peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1991), the notion of communities of practice has been developed by Etienne Wenger in later (1998) and more recent work. Wenger offers a definition of communities

of practice as “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>). In describing the act of knowing as participation in a social learning system, Wenger expands on the nature of the interaction by claiming that “communities of practice grow out of a convergent interplay of competence and experience that involves mutual engagement. They offer an opportunity to negotiate competence through an experience of direct participation” (2000, p.229).

Wenger describes the characteristics of a community of practice as: a shared domain of interest and a shared competence belonging to the group; engagement in discussions and activities that help individuals learn from each other; and the development of shared resources and problem-solving techniques that inform a shared practice (<http://www.ewenger.com/theory/index.htm>). This bears a clear similarity to the social learning that occurred with our group of applied learning teachers in their mutual engagement with knowledge production about youth cultures and post-compulsory students in applied learning settings.

Ben who was a little cynical about the relevance of an education course of study to his work with alienated young people outside of mainstream education and training settings, has enjoyed the mutual interaction and development of shared expertise that applied learning has enabled:

It's been a raging success and I think every student has enjoyed it. The content has been really good and the opportunity to network with other people from different areas has been great. To reflect on the experiences that everybody's had, has just been such a fantastic learning tool. I've surprisingly enjoyed the assignments, because I do enjoy being creative. It's been hard, but all in all I'm really happy with it.

When this kind of ‘distributed cognition’ occurs in situated learning (Lave and Wenger 1991) we find that “what can be understood and achieved by a group of learners working together can often be more than any one learner could understand and achieve alone” (Benzie et al. 2005, p.181). This is especially the case when we engage in a spirit of inquiry with others as part of a social learning system that positions competence and experience in a productive tension because this is when learning occurs (Wenger 2000). It can mean that another’s “competence pulls our experience” into new territory or that “we are using our experience to pull our community’s competence along” (Wenger 2000, p.227). This is how legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger 1999) works and it “is not just about goals, tasks and knowledge acquisition but also identity. In performing new tasks and demonstrating new understandings, learner’s identities are transformed. Furthermore, this is a two-way process... learning involves the co-construction of identities” (Benzie et al. 2005, p.182).

For example, Wendy has changed her identity as a learner and this has led to a change in how she works with others.

I think I've become more aware of how I learn and the focus on applied learning has made me look at different styles of teaching and, yes, I've become much more aware that there's different learning styles and therefore when I'm working with people, I'm more aware that they might learn differently from me. So, that's where I've changed.

Anna, too, has found a new identity in her work with young people in a non-school post-compulsory applied learning setting.

I've used a lot of principles that we've been studying this year and I've changed my approach to job train because of what I've learnt here. Wendy's actually sat through a couple of my job transitions with me and as an example, we talk about the barriers to employment and they all can name them because they've experienced all the knock-backs and I run the class now as much more of a co-operative where we share the knowledge we have, it's a shared wisdom.

The teaching team has begun to see this class of applied learning teachers as demonstrating the characteristics of a social learning system and community of practice for teaching in applied learning contexts and settings. They learn through doing things together, they build an image of themselves as teachers that reflects the things they learn through mutual engagement, and they are able to align and make effective their learning to contexts beyond those in which the learning took place. It is these characteristics that Wenger (2000) calls the 'modes of belonging' that intersect with the dimensions of communities of practice like enterprise and inquiry, trust and mutuality, and a reflexive orientation to changes in one's practice (2000, pp.227-231).

Conclusion

This paper has considered assessment practices employed in one component of the Graduate Diploma of Education in Applied Learning where a problem-solving approach has positioned learning, teaching and assessment as simultaneously 'applied' in a teacher education program. By taking an applied learning orientation to curriculum, pedagogy and assessment for a course of study in youth cultures and the education, training and transition needs of young people a set of conditions supportive of a social learning system were established for the learners. These conditions have led to the development of a spirit of inquiry, a trust in mutual learning, and a capacity to apply new knowledge and skills to problems encountered in post-compulsory education and training settings. This development exhibits many of the characteristics of a community of practice for applied learning teachers. It underlines the importance of getting assessment practices right in the construction of effective teaching and learning.

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