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## BUILDING CAPACITY IN APPLIED LEARNING

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### Abstract

Across the globe many nations have found engaging young people in the post compulsory years of school to ensure their transition into economic citizens is challenging. Governments are focusing on developing initiatives and programs to connect young people in education and training as preparation for the workplace. In Australia the use of Applied Learning as pedagogy is emerging as a valuable tool in the delivery of curriculum to engage young people in education. Educators who use Applied Learning pedagogy develop curriculum that is relevant to student interests and needs, connected into communities and results in young people acquiring workplace skills. One such program in Australia is the 'Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), offered in years 11 and 12 of school and firmly grounded in Applied Learning pedagogy. The challenge for many educators is, and has been, that there are marked differences between VCAL pedagogy and curriculum and the pedagogy and curriculum they may have previously used in senior school programs. This paper draws on research that explores the professional learning experiences of Applied Learning educators, in the context of the VCAL. I argue that general professional teaching experience alone is not necessarily adequate preparation for teaching in the VCAL program.

### Defining Applied Learning and Educators

The understanding of Applied Learning as pedagogy may vary between sectors and contexts (VCAA, 2011b; Harrison, 2006; Shacklock, 2006; Malyn-Smith, 2004). In this discussion, which refers to Applied Learning in the context of the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), the definition used is that provided by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), who are responsible for the development and publication of school curriculum in Victoria. The VCAA use the following eight principles to define the characteristics of Applied Learning pedagogy:

- Start where learners are at.
- Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
- Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
- Connect with communities and real life experiences.
- Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
- 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.
- 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.
- Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best 'fits' the learning content and context (VCAA, 2011b, p. 1)

These principles are important to note as they provide guidance to VCAL educators in the development of content for VCAL curriculum.

Identifying a term that could be used to describe those who 'teach' VCAL was problematic. The VCAL is taught by a range of educators (e.g. teachers, qualified tradespersons and those holding

Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment) in a variety of educational settings (e.g schools; Adult Community Education (ACE); and Technical and Further Education (TAFE)). For ease of discussion in this paper, the term 'educator' is used to refer to all teachers, trainers and appropriately qualified professionals who 'teach' VCAL.

## Introduction

As a result of a review of post compulsory education and training pathways in Victoria there was both policy review and restructure of post compulsory education (Kirby, 2000). One of the review recommendations indicated that 'focus of provision [of education and training] must be on the needs of the young people' (Kirby, 2000, p.8). Among the initiatives that resulted from the review was the development of a year 11 and 12 qualification known as the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL). As a result, the two predominant pathways in Victoria now offered to young people in the last two years of school are the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) and VCAL. The VCE was introduced in 1987 (University of Melbourne, 2011). The VCAL has been available since 2003 (Henry, Dalton, Wilde, Walsh & Wilde, 2003, p. 2).

Many educators who first implemented the VCAL program in 2002 and were involved in the widespread introduction in 2003 had no previous experience of Applied Learning as pedagogy. Ten years after VCAL was introduced, my own research indicates that educational settings do not appear to be ensuring that knowledge of Applied Learning pedagogy and curriculum development is available for new and continuing VCAL educators to draw on. Previous research has called for, and/or identified need of, greater support for VCAL educators and organisations (Schulz, 2011; Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, p.1; Harrison, 2006; Walsh, Beeson, Blake & Milne, 2005, p.8; Knipe, Ling, Bottrell & Keamy, 2003, p.6). Many VCAL educators have previously taught in VCE programs and/or VCE is offered in the setting in which they work. Existing individual and organisational knowledge regarding pedagogy and curriculum is frequently inadequate as VCE pedagogy and curriculum differs from that of VCAL. Additionally another challenge for VCAL educators is that within the VCAL cohort, there is a high concentration of young people who have special needs and exhibit challenging behaviours. Not all educators have the skills to deal with those needs and behaviours (Pritchard & Anderson, 2006, p.1).

This paper commences by indicating my own place in discussion of Applied Learning. The programs of VCE and VCAL are then introduced, followed by comparing an example of the curriculum each uses. Some differences in teaching using Applied Learning are discussed. Finally I present research data that indicates how, despite an apparent lack of support and preparation, educators are managing to develop Applied Learning skills and knowledge in their professional practice.

## Situating myself in an Applied Learning context

My knowledge of Applied Learning has been shaped by PhD research into issues surrounding the ability of VCAL educators to access learning to support their practice and work in VCAL. Joining the teaching team for the Graduate Diploma of Education (Applied Learning) (GDE(AL)) at Deakin University also shaped my understanding and knowledge. The GDE(AL) course is delivered using Applied Learning pedagogy, which models for pre-service teachers how they might use it in their own practice when teaching Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS), Vocation Education Training (VET), VCAL or VCE.

I realised I had *become* an Applied Learning educator during the process of planning lessons and identifying learning outcomes for GDE(AL) sessions. It became evident my challenges were similar to those of the research participants; to identify appropriate Applied Learning teaching strategies and curriculum content to support the successful completion of learning outcomes. While I do not work as a VCAL educator, I am an Applied Learning educator with professional knowledge of the curriculum and pedagogy, along with experiences of challenges faced in development and delivery.

## The introduction of VCE and VCAL

Both VCE and VCAL were originally introduced to support and promote completion of 12 years of schooling and transition into various pathways of further education, training and the workplace. VCE was intended to “replace the collection of alternate certificates which had evolved over time to cater for students with diverse aspirations and abilities” (Brew and Leder, 2000 p.1-2). An approach of one academic certificate to suit all learning pathways was not regarded as successful and VCAL was developed as a result of the Kirby (2000) report. The rationale was to encourage those without university aspirations into completing school while attaining either vocational qualifications or work-readiness skills. Both VCAL and VCE may include VET study (VCAA, 2011a, p.10). VCE is still seen by many as ‘the’ pathway to university. VCAL study however can also support a pathway to university as Senior VCAL components are able to contribute (for example) to the pre-entry requirements for a Bachelor of Education (Primary) at Deakin University.

Both the introduction of VCE and VCAL appeared to suffer from the lack of consultation with educators in the design and implementation (Howells, 2012; Knipe, et al., 2003). Howells citing Hargreaves (2012, para 4) pointed out this omission was “not new”. Other authors have previously indicated that educators’ “views are rarely sought and little appreciated” (Welch, 2007, p2). Connelly and Clandinin (1999) along with Groundwater Smith, Brennan, McFadden and Mitchel (2001) also consider that educators’ knowledge has been an under used resource. Brew and Leder (2000, p.2) writing about the implementation of the VCE in 1992 argue

Historically, the successful implementation of educational innovations has been thwarted "from within" when teachers do not have a clear understanding of what is expected of them, and when they have lacked the skills and knowledge required to perform their new role (Gross, 1971). It has been argued (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991) that a crucial factor that affects the adoption and continuation of innovations is the quality of the relationship between policy-makers and local practitioners

These comments could have equally been directed at the implementation of the VCAL in 2003. Knipe, et al (2003, p. 6) expressed concern that in the implementation of VCAL there was no apparent “consultation with those involved in either implementing the change or in being beneficiaries of the change”. In 2005 a VQA project found that support for the VCAL educators and the VCAL program was a key ingredient for a successful program and continued to be of concern (Walsh, et al., 2005). Harrison (2006, p. 12) identified that educators “need support if Applied Learning is to fulfil its potential” while Pritchard and Anderson (2006) called for research of the implementation of VCAL in ACE and TAFE. They highlighted that educators in those settings do not necessarily have the skills to deal with young people for whom mainstream education in schools has not been successful. None of the calls for support for VCAL educators appear to have been addressed (Schulz, 2011).

## Differences between VCAL and VCE

In this paper I argue that previous teaching experience, including senior years’ programs such as the VCE, does not necessarily prepare or support an educator for teaching the VCAL program. The following differences between the VCAL and VCE are discussed to support this assertion:

- The ways curriculum is enacted
- Applied Learning as pedagogy
- Efficiency and effectiveness in Applied Learning
- Professional teaching practice boundaries

## The ways curriculum is enacted

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) is responsible for the authorised

curriculum study designs for both VCAL and VCE. The following curriculum guidelines for VCE English Unit 3 (Table 1) and the VCAL Senior Literacy Skills Unit of 'Reading and Writing' (Table 2) have been sourced for comparison purposes. These two levels of curriculum are deemed comparable levels of study (VCAA, 2010 p.2).

**Table 1**  
**VCE English – Unit 3**

**AREA OF STUDY 1**

**Reading and responding**

This area of study focuses on the reading of a range of literary texts to develop critical and supported responses.

Students examine the structures, features and conventions used by authors of a range of selected texts to construct meaning. They identify, discuss and analyse these in order to explain how meaning is constructed through textual elements such as language and images. They also examine the ways in which the same text is open to different interpretations by different readers; for example, the ways in which a text can be read differently in a different time, place or culture. They describe and analyse the way in which social, historical and/or cultural values are embodied in texts, and develop oral and written responses to a selected text, using appropriate metalanguage. The term 'selected text' refers to a text chosen from the list of prescribed texts in Text List 1 published annually in the *VCAA Bulletin*.

**Outcome 1**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse, either orally or in writing, how a selected text constructs meaning, conveys ideas and values, and is open to a range of interpretations. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills outlined in area of study 1.

*Key knowledge*

This knowledge includes

- an understanding of the ideas, characters and themes constructed by the author and presented in the selected text;
- the structures, features and conventions used by authors to construct meaning in a range of literary texts;
- methods of analysing complex texts and the social, historical and/or cultural values embodied in texts;
- the ways in which the same text is open to different interpretations by different readers;
- strategies and techniques for constructing a supported analysis of a text, including a knowledge of the metalanguage appropriate to the analysis and to the text type;
- key elements of oral language conventions and usage in a range of text types;
- features of spoken texts which successfully engage audiences;
- techniques for managing feedback and leading discussion;
- the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

*Key skills*

These skills include the ability to

- critically analyse texts and the ways in which authors construct meaning;
- analyse the social, historical and/or cultural values embodied in texts;
- discuss and compare possible interpretations of texts using evidence from the text;
- use appropriate metalanguage to construct a supported analysis of a text;
- plan and revise written work for fluency and coherence;
- apply oral language conventions in a chosen oral text type;
- engage an audience through interested and varied language use;
- respond to audience interest and engagement;
- use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

## AREA OF STUDY 2

### Creating and presenting

The focus in this area of study is on reading and writing and their interconnection. A list of prescribed Contexts will be published annually in the *VCAA Bulletin*. The same Context should be the focus of study in both Units 3 and 4. Two texts, one in Unit 3 and one in Unit 4, will support this area of study. These texts must be selected from the list of prescribed texts in Text List 2 which will be published annually in the *VCAA Bulletin*. In addition to these selected texts, teachers are encouraged to consider student interests and to support the achievement of the outcome by providing students with opportunities to read other texts – print, non-print and multimodal – that explore ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context. Students will read these texts in order to identify, discuss and analyse ideas and/or arguments associated with the selected Context. They will reflect on the ideas and/or arguments suggested by these texts, explore the relationship between purpose, form, audience and language, and examine the choices made by authors in order to construct meaning. Students will then draw on the ideas and/or arguments they have gained from the texts studied to construct their own texts. They write for a specified audience and purpose and draw on their experience of exploring texts to explain their own decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context.

### Outcome 2

On completion of this unit the student should be able to draw on ideas and/or arguments suggested by a chosen Context to create written texts for a specified audience and purpose; and to discuss and analyse in writing their decisions about form, purpose, language, audience and context. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills outlined in area of study 2.

#### *Key knowledge*

This knowledge includes

- the relationship between purpose, form, language and audience in a range of print, non-print and multimodal text types, with close attention to authors' choices of specific structures and features; for example, style, images, design, point of view, tone and register;
- the ideas and/or arguments relevant to the chosen Context, including an understanding of the ideas and arguments presented in selected text/s;
- strategies for creating, reviewing and editing;
- metalanguage to discuss and analyse their own and others' creative choices;
- the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

#### *Key skills*

These skills include the ability to

- analyse the relationship between purpose, form and audience in a range of text types, with close attention to authors' choices of structures and features;
- select and shape information, ideas and argument appropriate to the chosen form, audience, purpose and context;
- draw on ideas and/or arguments presented in selected text/s;
- use appropriate strategies to review and edit texts for fluency and coherence;
- use appropriate metalanguage to discuss and analyse their own and others' authorial choices;
- use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

## AREA OF STUDY 3

### Using language to persuade

The focus of this area of study is on the analysis and comparison of the use of language in texts that debate a topical issue which has appeared in the Australian media since 1 September of the previous year. Students read, view and listen to texts such as feature articles and opinion columns, cartoons, editorials, letters to the editor, interviews on current affairs programs, websites and CD-ROMs, speeches, excerpts from online focus and discussion groups, and advertisements in magazines and newspapers, and on websites and television. They

analyse and compare the ways in which verbal and non-verbal (including visual) language of these texts is used to persuade readers and viewers to share the point/s of view being presented. Drawing on their study of the use of language to persuade, students construct a piece of sustained and reasoned writing in which they put forward their own point of view on the selected issue in written or oral form.

### **Outcome 3**

On completion of this unit the student should be able to analyse the use of language in texts that present a point of view on an issue currently debated in the Australian media, and to construct, orally or in writing, a sustained and reasoned point of view on the selected issue. To achieve this outcome the student will draw on knowledge and related skills outlined in area of study 3.

#### *Key knowledge*

This knowledge includes

- the structures, features and conventions of a range of persuasive texts from the Australian media – print, non-print and multimodal – constructed for different audiences and contexts;
- techniques for the critical analysis of ideas, arguments and evidence presented in persuasive texts;
- strategies and metalanguage for identifying, analysing and comparing the use of verbal and nonverbal (including visual) language designed to position readers in particular ways;
- strategies for constructing a sustained, coherent and logical argument;
- the conventions of small group and whole class discussion, including ways of developing constructive interactions and building on ideas of others;
- the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

#### *Key skills*

These skills include the ability to

- identify the structures, features and conventions of a range of persuasive texts from the Australian media – print, non-print and multimodal – constructed for different audiences and contexts;
- use strategies and appropriate metalanguage for identifying, analysing and comparing the use of verbal and non-verbal (including visual) language to position readers in particular ways;
- gather, organise, analyse and synthesise information and ideas into a sustained, coherent and logical argument;
- listen actively and respond appropriately to others' views during discussion;
- acknowledge sources accurately and appropriately where relevant;
- use the conventions of spelling, punctuation and syntax of Standard Australian English.

(Source: VCAA, 2006, p 24-27)

**Table 2**  
***VCAL – Literacy Skills: Senior Reading and Writing***

#### ***Content summary***

“Content and underpinning knowledge relevant to each learning outcome can be found in the learning outcome details. The learning outcomes should be covered in a context and through subject matter that is relevant to the student. A range of different text types or genres should be covered in each learning outcome. Although it is only necessary to cover one text type to show competence of a learning outcome, the learning situation should allow students to develop competence in reading and writing a range of text types.”

#### ***Summary of Learning Outcomes***

##### **1. Writing for Self Expression**

Write a complex recount, narrative or expressive text.

##### **2. Writing for Practical Purposes**

Write a complex instructional or transactional text.

##### **3. Writing for Knowledge**

Write a complex report, explanatory or expository text.

**4. Writing for Public Debate**

Write a complex persuasive, argumentative or discursive text.

**5. Reading for Self Expression**

Demonstrate that meaning has been gained from reading a complex, sustained narrative, recount or expressive text.

**6. Reading for Practical Purposes**

Demonstrate that meaning has been gained from reading a complex, sustained instructional or transactional text.

**7. Reading for Knowledge**

Demonstrate that meaning has been gained from reading a complex, sustained report, explanatory, expository or informative text.

**8. Reading for Public Debate**

Demonstrate that meaning has been gained from reading a complex, sustained argumentative or discursive text.

(Source: VCAA 2008, p. 91-92)

From the example in Table 1 it can be seen that VCE educators are provided with very specific directions regarding content. On the other hand Table 2 provides little direction regarding content. A VCE unit is equitable to one semester of study. The VCAL Senior Literacy Skills unit equates to two semesters of study. The directions for the VCAL unit provide less information for a considerably longer period of time. The lack of *prescribed* content in the VCAL unit is in accord with the principles of Applied Learning. VCAL educators, together with their students, identify and negotiate appropriate curriculum content. The negotiation process is however, time consuming. Often the educators will not know the interests or abilities of their students prior to the commencement of teaching. They may not be aware of potential for linkages into the community or for partnerships with local industry. When the VCAL was first introduced, VCAL providers received funding for VCAL coordinators who assisted VCAL educators in identifying, and liaising with, community and industry partners. In August 2011 the Victorian government announced an intention to cut funding to organisations for VCAL coordination. In response the Victorian Applied Learning Association<sup>1</sup> (VALA) released a statement highlighting VCAL coordination is frequently complex and “requires extra student support systems, cross subject area planning and organisation, as well as the establishment and maintenance of community and work related links. All this requires coordination above and beyond normal teaching and assessment processes” (VALA, 2011, para. 2).

When the level of detail given for assessment in VCE and VCAL are compared a similar difference regarding the level of detail required can be identified. Guidelines to VCE educators are specific regarding content of assessment, process and marking. The VCAL guidelines to educators indicate what the student is to do, but do not dictate the specific task. The VCAL curriculum content must result in assessment tasks and artefacts that can be used as evidence a student has met (all elements of) learning outcomes (VCAA 2006, 2010, 2012).

## Applied Learning as pedagogy

As indicated previously, Applied Learning in the context of VCAL is based on the following principles: start where learners are at, negotiate the curriculum, share knowledge, value learners’ existing knowledge, connect with communities, consider the whole person, integrate learning, promote diversity of learning styles and methods and assess appropriately (VCAA, 2011b, p. 1). Subsequently Applied Learning

is central to the VCAL and students can achieve formal recognition of learning that occurs in a diverse range of non-traditional learning settings, including structured workplace learning placements, part-time work, locally developed programs, community projects, and

<sup>1</sup> VALA is a professional organisation for Applied Learning Educators see <http://www.vala.asn.au/>

participation in youth development programs (Blake & Gallagher, 2009, p. 53)

At a VCAL Showcase day in Ballarat during December 2009<sup>2</sup> a VCAL educator described how they formulated VCAL curriculum content from a project in which the students set up a 'lolly shop' in Stawell. The process included the development of a business plan, approvals from council, sourcing of fit-out for the shop, acquiring, managing and pricing of stock, learning about food handling and compliance with occupational health and safety. The teacher related how they and their students were navigating health, safety, legal and compliance requirements; doing so was a completely new experience for the educator as well as the students. The educator was required to have project management skills, be able to teach students how to project manage and have the ability to guide and encourage independent learning for a cohort of young people, among whom a number had challenging behaviours.

## Efficiency and effectiveness in Applied Learning

Schwartzman (2010, p.5-6) highlights the tension between ensuring education is both efficient and effective

.....embracing efficiency can sacrifice effectiveness. The reason lies in the very definition of efficiency. Assuming the definition of efficiency as the ratio of input to output, one quick way to raise efficiency is to deliver the same results while reducing investment in resources such as personnel, facilities, and equipment. While outcomes might resist improvement, input in the form of time, money, or other resources can be cut quickly. Doing the same with less earns a higher grade for efficiency.

The reason for this Schwartzman (2010, p. 5) says is that effective teaching and learning which is student centred

clashes with the imperative of efficiency. Movements toward intensifying educational experiences, such as using "high-impact educational practices" (Kuh, 2008) that carry substantial experiential components, run against the current of efficiency. In fact, most educational practices acquire their status as high-impact precisely because they require dedicating more energy, time, and resources than required for other educational endeavors. Raising impact may lower efficiency

VCE curriculum content does not necessarily change from year to year and is delivered to students using teacher centred pedagogy. On the other hand VCAL has student centred pedagogy, curriculum content changes from cohort to cohort and it is specifically structured to engage young people in education and promote their transition into further education, training and the workplace (Blake 2009; Henry et al 2003). An indicator of the success of VCAL can be seen in the increase of enrolments since its implementation. In 2003 there were 5137 students enrolled in VCAL, in 2011 the number had risen to 21,350 (VCAA, 2012; VCAA, 2012a)

The development of curriculum intended to be meaningful and relevant to the students (effective) results in educators making connections with outside agencies as part of their lesson preparation. This is necessary to source and negotiate the partnerships and networks inherent in VCAL curriculum content. The process is however, time consuming.

## Professional teaching practice boundaries

It is accepted that all professional teaching practice has indeterminate boundaries. Educators in many settings participate in out-of-hours activities with students, support student wellbeing, accompany students on overnight excursions, and provide extra study support. The boundaries of VCAL educators are especially ill-defined

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<sup>2</sup> VCAL Showcase Day: Sebastopol College, Ballarat, 9 December 2009

Unlike VCE, VCAL curriculum is very flexible to allow it to be customised to the needs and interests of students. As such it needs to go beyond the use of textbooks in the way it is delivered. In addition, VCAL does not have a high percentage of externally set assessments (VALA, 2011, para 2).

Research by Pritchard and Anderson (2006, p. 1) indicates that the VCAL cohort includes a high number of young people who have special needs and exhibit challenging behaviours for which teachers are not prepared, especially those who teach in the settings of TAFE and ACE.

## The professional Experiences of Applied Learning Educators

Although there are commissioned reports on the implementation of the VCAL program (Walsh et al 2005; Henry et al 2003) there is very little existing critical research regarding the professional learning experiences of Applied Learning educators in the context of VCAL. The following discussion includes data drawn from qualitative research aimed at addressing a gap in available knowledge. Interviews were conducted with 22 Applied Learning educators who deliver VCAL in the settings of schools, ACE and TAFE. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were asked open-ended questions which had been developed to produce information about the professional learning experiences of Applied Learning educators<sup>3</sup>. The questions ranged from asking about prior professional experiences, accessing professional development to the challenges and satisfaction in teaching in VCAL. The interviews were, on average, of one hour duration. At the time of the interviews data gathering was not specifically focused on eliciting the differences between teaching in VCAL and teaching in other senior school programs. However as Metzger (1979, p.104) indicates “there are stories inside stories and stories between stories”. From within the stories of the participants’ professional learning and teaching experiences came stories of the challenges of teaching in VCAL *because of the differences* in the program from previous teaching experiences.

### The difference in Pedagogy

The process of developing curriculum content, using Applied Learning pedagogy requires that VCAL educators think beyond the model of VCE. ‘Sue’ said:

*I feel really sorry for people who have been teaching mainstream secondary school and get put into VCAL because they are trying to adapt the VCAL curriculum to teach it the VCE way or the mainstream way and I think that you just can't do it. I was at QA [the VCAL Quality Assurance process] last year and a new provider of numeracy was there. They started at foundation numeracy because they were a new provider. This woman had her whole years plan and said 'oh it is just so basic – we shouldn't have had to do foundation'. I explained how we here are lucky to get through our foundation numeracy in a year, because it is massive. We cover every topic so many different ways that there is no way the students could not understand it. As far as I am concerned, if you pass them on VCAL they have to understand it. We have 15 kids in the class – here we have to present every idea in 15 different ways to make sure they have all got it. This lady had created numeracy as if she was teaching VCE numeracy. 'Oh' she goes 'I just got them to do a series of worksheets to cover the eight outcomes and that was it – so how hard can that be?' I believe that is not just about having the evidence at the end it is about the process you have gone through to get them there.*

Planning VCAL assessment, similar to planning VCAL curriculum, is resource and time intensive, more so to those unfamiliar with Applied Learning curriculum. ‘Sara’, when asked about her preparation for teaching in VCAL, replied

*...I think it was formally very poor ... I would have liked to have known a great deal more*

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<sup>3</sup> Ethics approval obtained from the Deakin Human Research Ethics Committee

*about the curriculum. The WRS [Work Related Skills] I really didn't get a handle on until this year in terms of looking carefully at outcomes and providing evidence for outcomes...*

When 'Sara' started teaching VCAL, the school was implementing the program for the first time 'Sara' said:

*I had no content [for VCAL curriculum strands such as Work Related Skills and Professional Development Skills]. I had the teaching strategies probably in place and I was used to engaging kids who were completely disengaged, but I had no content. It was HORRENDOUS, it was horrendous. I was stressed out of my head because I had never heard of WRS [Work Related Skills] (laughs) I didn't understand the curriculum at all. I had no idea about postcompulsory in this state and it was very difficult. Nobody knew anything [she describes a lack of school support and knowledge about VCAL]. The administration thought they knew a lot about postcompulsory schooling...but they had no concept of the content, not a jot.*

'Sara' said *I did a very pragmatic thing....I thought my issue here is to survive this.* Her response to the lack of support was to draw on her previous experience in connecting with communities and project work. Not every VCAL educator has these skills already in their professional skills 'toolbox' to draw on.

'Sally' has indicated that:

*....there is no preparation for VCAL teachers and I think that is great shame....as far as PD goes there is virtually not a lot around, it is a real indictment on the system that there is not a lot of PD or training. Having said that though, it is the schools too. When they [schools] are employing people they are still employing straight academic people and tending to not want to employ for this area [VCAL], but it is a big growth area in the school ... and they are not employing the people that fit these positions and that's where it is hard for us to get the hands on teachers in the trades.*

'Sally' continued to explain how the lack of preparation and support had direct impact on the perception of VCAL by the school community

*... even though they ran a couple of pilot programs nobody knew anything about it, there was no money, no teacher, no preparation, no PD as to how you were going to do this. Unfortunately our first year, because we were so ill prepared, set the scene for the next 3 or 4 years and they put everybody into VCAL – all the naughty kids came to VCAL. It has taken us years to recover from that. It was just a nightmare trying to work with that group of kids and that set the tone. We have turned that around quite considerably, but it still lingers*

'Sue', 'Sara' and 'Sally' are required to use their own agency, along with drawing on past experiences to develop VCAL curriculum content that is student centred i.e. based on the interests and abilities of their students. In contrast, the curriculum content for VCE, having been predetermined by the VCAA, is teacher centred and does not cater for individual interests and abilities.

## Efficiency versus Effectiveness

Anecdotes from pre-service teachers in the GDE(AL) indicate that, while on teaching placements, they have observed their supervising teacher/s ignoring the principals of Applied Learning in VCAL lessons and predominately providing class room worksheets to students, which is efficient, but not effective learning.

Evidence in the data indicated that not all VCAL providers allocated their VCAL coordination funding to VCAL programs. 'Sara' indicated when she and her students *set off to do this, we had no money, not a cent, not a single cent, I had no budget, I had nothing.* Her school may have been efficient with its VCAL coordinator funding (by directing it elsewhere), but not effective. As previously indicated

'Sara' drew on her experience of project work and how to connect into communities. It cannot be assumed that all VCAL educators have the confidence, knowledge or ability to do the same.

Challenges faced by VCAL educators in managing the time consuming activities of negotiating community linkages have increased with VCAL coordination funding being cut in 2012 (VALA, 2011, para. 4). Coordination funding was able to cover payment for Contract Relief Teachers (CRT) so that VCAL educators could be released from contact time with students to allow for liaising, and negotiating professional partnerships, with outside agencies.

### Applied Learning Boundaries

The forming of professional partnerships with organisations and community groups supports the project style curriculum of VCAL. This however also results in "coordination above and beyond normal teaching...." (VALA, 2011, para. 4). The benefits are structured workplace learning partnerships and networking relationships to support meaningful and relevant curriculum content. 'Sara' said

*All my background coalesced to become useful in this particular scenario ...I had a good background, I had ESL, I had adult learning, I had applied learning, I had developmental learning and I had a strong background in boy's learning because I had been at a boy's school for the last 10 years – most of these kids are boys and that background in boys education has been very useful. At the end of last year I realised that I needed to get a really good handle on the outcomes, I needed to understand this community and how they could help. I joined Rotary; I did a few things like that so that I could get a handle on what this community is about.*

Another factor is that VCAL, by association, includes consideration of several different types of 'risk'. VCAL includes a cohort of students who have a higher incidence of 'challenging behaviours' and 'risk taking'. The students are at risk of leaving school and not transitioning into further education. The educators in working with young people are also 'at risk' of physical, verbal and cyber abuse (for example). Then there is the 'risk taking' in developing curriculum content. 'Sally' indicated:

*...these kids are rambunctious sort of kids that we get in, but to me they are also highly intelligent a lot of the time and they are very resourceful. When they are set a task to do that we might think is quite difficult they can actually run with it reasonably well, but you have to have teachers in the classroom that let kids run with things and do not want to tie them down and have a set curriculum. VCAL doesn't have a set curriculum and that is the beauty of it and you have got to have teachers that can work without structure and want to run with projects and programs and run with the kids a little and be able to put up with a bit of ...you know..give and take ....and ..to and fro.. with the kids and that is part of it.*

VCAL provides an opportunity for *rambunctious* students to cross the boundary from 'being at risk of leaving school early and not transitioning into further education and training' to 'engaged in education and training and working towards getting a job'.

For VCAL programs to be successful it is important that educators have, or develop, skills to form pedagogical relationships with students who have wide range of abilities, disabilities and special learning needs. Additionally educators require liaising skills to scaffold the forming of partnerships with community groups. Such relationships provide support in developing, planning and resourcing programs and projects suitable for their VCAL student cohort.

### Conclusion

VCAL and VCE have marked differences in pedagogy and the development of curriculum content. General professional teaching experience alone is not necessarily adequate preparation for teaching using Applied Learning pedagogy. To counter a lack of professional preparation Applied Learning

educators appear to be learning through their own agency and by drawing from their past professional and life experiences. This is not a viable long term solution as not all Applied Learning educators may necessarily have the attribute of agency, along with skills and knowledge from experience to support their practice. Additionally settings do not appear to be valuing and sharing knowledge that is being created by current VCAL educators. Senge (2006 (rev), p. 129) says "Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs".

The sharing and valuing of VCAL knowledge is especially important in light of the announcement of funding cuts to VCAL

... the additional \$12 million funding allocated to schools to co-ordinate the [VCAL] program every year was no longer needed as it was now well established in schools and local communities (Topsfield, 2011, para 5).

VALA (2011) responded with a statement indicating that the number of VCAL providers who have not previously been involved in the organising and delivering VCAL curriculum is increasing. Subsequently this means there will continue to be novice providers and novice educators for whom VCAL is *not* well established and who would *not* have Applied Learning knowledge and resources to support effective teaching and learning.

As 'Sue has said

*I feel really sorry for people who have been teaching mainstream secondary school and get put into VCAL because they are trying to adapt the VCAL curriculum to teach it the VCE way or the mainstream way and I think that you just can't do it.....*

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