

Teacher ICT skills a key to online benefits for VET in Schools

Introduction

“Professional development in Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) skills is essential for teachers engaged in flexible learning in Vocational Education in Training (VET) in Schools programs,” says Sandra Robinson, who focused on this topic as a Flexible Learning Leader in 2002.

Sandra’s project saw her develop knowledge and skills in online delivery by taking part in a range of professional development activities. She looked at what could be learned from innovative practice in the VET sector in the Australian States of South Australia and Tasmania.

At the time Sandra was the Enterprise and Vocational Education Coordinator for the Swan Education District office in Western Australia (WA). She currently maintains her stake in flexible learning as Executive Officer with the Mandurah Youth Commitment.

In this role, Sandra is working to achieve appropriate educational opportunities for young people aged up to 24, spending a third of her time as the Enterprise and Vocational Education Coordinator for the Peel region of WA. This means working in partnership with Mandurah Senior College, where some seventy per cent of students are enrolled in VET in Schools programs.

On flexible learning for VET in Schools, Sandra says, “The schooling sector is still behind where the TAFE sector is [in some States]. There hasn’t been the resourcing for professional learning for people to come on board”.

Glenda McPherson, a Flexible Learning Consultant with TAFE frontiers, Victoria, agrees. She notes that school professional development is rarely well located or in school hours – pointing to a role for online delivery of professional development as well as teaching and learning.

Mick Chalmers the Manager of eLearning Delivery in the School Education Division of the Department of Education, Tasmania, sees supporting innovators as the key to professional learning. He stated, “if VET in Schools RTOs don’t have professional learning support and resources, they cannot achieve the vision”.

Online benefits for VET in Schools

For Sandra, there are clear benefits to promoting flexible learning through an investment in professional development. Flexible learning can be accessed from the workplace or home, offering the opportunity to break out of the constraints of school timetables and, potentially, limited student numbers in particular programs. It can also offer individualised programs and the ability to integrate adult learning principles that appeal to young people.

In fact, Sandra sees engagement as the key potential benefit of flexible learning in VET in Schools. In her Flexible Learning Leader year, Sandra learned that “kids need the opportunity to collaborate and communicate with people, and they can use the online environment to do that”. She is now providing such opportunities in the Mandurah Youth Commitment’s online centre.

Mick Chalmers considers that “relevance to the real world, that is, the authenticity of the (earning) experience, is the driver of student engagement in VET in Schools programs”.

Professional development to engage learners

“Teachers need to develop a focus on communication and collaboration rather than content. Most people who look at the online environment feel that the first thing they have to do is to get all the content online,” Sandra says.

Glenda McPherson concurs with this view, noting that “teachers need to prepare for online communication....at the moment [some]schools do not have that culture....they’ve taken VET into schools, without the flexible learning agenda”.

Another key issue which impacts student engagement and has implications for equity, is the often high degree of computer literacy needed to reap the full rewards of flexible learning. Sandra says that research undertaken in the Swan District of WA, among a group of secondary students, found that sixty per cent had computers at home, “but the ones we wanted to engage didn’t have Personal Computers (PCs).”

This highlighted the importance of an induction program that assesses computer skills and allows learners with inadequate skills to access appropriate programs to build them (see Links below).

An interesting offshoot from the research was the finding that students without a PC invariably had a mobile phone. Consequently, Sandra’s current work involves using mobiles to, for example, communicate and coordinate face-to-face meetings.

For Sandra, the professional development upshot is that teachers “need to be aware of equity issues and ensure they’re built into ...[the]... program....there’s also the issue of computer access”.

There is also room for greater flexibility in online learning within VET in Schools programs. Sandra suggests that “most online learning in these programs is still classroom-based, whereas with the Mandurah Youth Commitment, we’ve taken an approach of learning in the community”. The online learning centre is located in a shopping centre, where it is easy for students to drop in. Mick Chalmers notes that “online learning is underpinned by a three way relationship (teacher, student, online mentor/coach/support person) which makes it essentially different from the two way student-teacher relationships in traditional face to face settings. Once out of the classroom the challenge is to create/provide the third person in the relationship”

While the Mandurah Youth Commitment is working outside the secondary school system, the approach is one that has also found favour in Tasmania, where sixty four Online Access Centres, some of which are linked to Rural VET in Schools Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and ANTA Skills Centres, are dotted throughout the State.

Distance education: Tasmanian lessons go Australia-wide

According to Sandra, there are many features of the Tasmanian professional development approach that promise benefits for teachers of VET in Schools across Australia.

There, teachers new to flexible learning are supported face-to-face or via an online professional learning system, which, in addition to facilitating the planning and delivery of e-learning, provides a range of learning tools and resources, including online forums.

The Tasmanian model combines workshops and online activities with ‘in-school’ and cluster support. Online teachers who come through the program become mentors and lead other teachers who are making the move online. Sandra notes, “there is funding and

time to develop and establish courses, and teachers agree to share, thereby building a community of practice as well as supporting individuals”.

Supporting the innovators

While some have attributed the small size of Tasmania as a key reason for the success of its VET in Schools program, Sandra thinks there are other factors.

“There’s wide acknowledgment of the advantages and challenges, whereas in other places this still exists only in clumps. Through their highly successful professional development approach Tasmania has harnessed funds and dispersed them through the system to support the innovators”, Sandra says.

To conclude our interview, we asked Sandra to make a pitch for what makes a successful online approach for VET in Schools.

She responded as follows:

“At a local level, find out what works for your teachers and students. Aim for community ownership of learning and decision-making rather than taking a system-wide approach that is more appropriate to standards and resourcing.”

Glenda agreed, saying that successful flexible learning for VET in Schools “will be driven by the teachers and students, from the bottom up, not the top down”.

Appendix One summarises both the key features of the Tasmanian professional learning approach and success factors for effective professional development for teaching online.

<p>Teacher support in Tasmania</p> <p>Management and advocacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adapting practice • Identifying and adapting content for online delivery • Establishing a supportive environment • School planning • Time management <p>e-moderation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building relationships • Managing discussions • Engaging learners <p>Technical skills</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forums • WebCT • Webpublishing • Videoconferencing • Troubleshooting 	<p>Effective PD for teaching online</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focuses on collaboration and communication, not just content • Engenders sharing and the notion of (online) communities of practice • Builds awareness of the advantages and challenges of online delivery • Exploits flexibility to include potential settings beyond the classroom • Is strategically timed to fit with school timelines and schedules • Is short and sharp • Has obvious cost benefits to the school • Is focused on areas of prime concern – for example, meeting audit compliance, satisfying economic class sizing, fulfilling parental concerns, funding • Addresses student engagement and equity issues – for example, teachers need to be trained to assess for the basic computer and literacy skills of students who will be engaged in flexible learning. • Is linked to making teaching load more manageable. • Encourages teachers to find out what works at a local level for them and their students.
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Useful Links

Australian Flexible Learning Framework, 2002, *Skills Assessment for Computer Based Learning*, Australian National Training Authority, Melbourne.

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/innovations/files/qld011/sacl/index.htm>

Australian Flexible Learning Framework, (n.d.) [Workplace Trainer \(Literacy & Numeracy\) Toolbox](#) (Equity Series 4) Australian National Training Authority, Melbourne.

<http://flexiblelearning.net.au/toolbox/series4/425.htm>

'Tasmanian Flexible Learning Report' for updates on recent changes to e-learning professional development systems and programs.

http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition06/html/bra_tas.html

TAFE Frontiers <http://www.tafefrontiers.com.au>

Elearning Delivery Team, Department of Education Tasmania

<http://www.e-magine.education.tas.gov.au/OnlineCampus/default.htm>

<http://www.e-magine.education.tas.gov.au/elearning.htm>

Tasmanian Colleges Online

<http://www.collegesonline.tased.edu.au/default.htm>

Bibliography

Chalmers M. 2002, 'e-magine Online Campus: VET in Schools implementation' in *The Knowledge Tree An e-Journal of Flexible Learning in Vocational Education and Training (VET)*, Edition 01, August 2002. Retrieved 3 September 2004 from

http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree/edition01/html/_download/mick.pdf

Robinson S. 2002, *Flexible Learning Leaders 2002 Final Report*, Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Retrieved 25 August 2004 from

http://flexiblelearning.net.au/leaders/fl_leaders/fl02/finalreport/final_robinson.pdf

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