

Diverse Environments Not Your Usual Practice: Educational Voices in the Workplace

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Introduction

In 2009 the authors attended the WELL Practitioners' National Conference in Adelaide. It was noted that since the review of the WELL program in 2006 (KPMG, 2006) there had been a lot of developments in WELL planning and policy. With the release of the two guides, 'A Professional Development Guide for WELL Practitioners' (2009) and 'WELL Professional Development Guide: Planning an effective WELL training project and preparing a successful WELL training application' (2010), some highly valuable support material had been developed for WELL practitioners, coordinators and managers. A lot had been heard about the challenges and successes of delivery in WELL, but not a lot had been heard directly from WELL practitioners. As with all sectors of Education, the WELL practitioner profile is getting older. Anecdotally, it seems it is very hard to find and retain WELL practitioners. Yet, many practitioners stay in the WELL program for many years. If it is so hard, why do some stay and why are others attracted to it? If the experiences of WELL practitioners could be captured and understood perhaps some useful ideas could be found to recruit and induct new WELL practitioners.

This project interviewed 32 practitioners around Australia and has resulted in a report, a DVD of interview extracts and a set of induction/professional development activities.

A preliminary to these thoughts

As a reader of this paper, please take a moment to respond to or think about these questions.

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| How many years have you | worked in education? | Taught? |
| What qualifications do you have? | | |
| What type of satisfaction do you get from your teaching or educational work? | | |
| To do your work effectively, what types of support do you draw upon? | | |
| Do you feel the methodology you use in your setting could be transferred to a workplace delivery? (or the other way if you are currently working in industry?) | | |
| What would be the best way to induct a teacher new to your area of delivery? | | |

Deciding what to ask

As noted above, we were interested in finding out why practitioners stayed in WELL delivery. We wanted to know what they found satisfying, which supports they drew upon, whether or not there could be transfer of methodology between the classroom and the workplace, and how they felt WELL practitioners should be inducted.

Four hypotheses were developed based upon our own experience in WELL. Rhonda has been a WELL practitioner, coordinator and manager; John has worked for MESAB, an Industry Skill Council that has supported WELL for many years, and is now working to support the Australian WELL Practitioners' Network; and Katrina Hegarty was the Victorian WELL Coordinator. The hypotheses were:

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- WELL practitioners do not experience different personal and professional advantages to those experienced by classroom-based practitioners
- It is not possible to effectively transfer methodological experience between WELL enterprise work sites and institution-based programs.
- Staff induction processes do not prepare practitioners for flexible practices between workplace and institution delivery.
- Current recruitment processes are not effective for attracting new practitioners to WELL training

The assumption within these hypotheses is that WELL practitioners have the same types of motivation as any other education practitioner. The questions below were written to elicit practitioners' thoughts.

- Where's the buzz in WELL training for you personally and professionally?
- What types of support do you access for WELL?
- Is there anything that could be transferred or adapted from a WELL-style of delivery to a classroom or from a classroom delivery to WELL?
- How important is induction to the new WELL Practitioner?
- How can we attract people to WELL as a career?

With the information from the practitioners a set of activities was developed to induct a new WELL practitioner and to provide professional development. The data also highlighted actions that could be taken to build on WELL practitioners' knowledge and experience to support other practitioners who must integrate LLN in their own delivery or work closely with industry.

Hearing what was said

How do you describe the feeling you get when things go well with a learner or a group? We selected 'buzz' as a fairly broad term and waited to see how the WELL practitioners would interpret it.

In general, their answers fell into two broad categories: personal and professional. Sometimes it was hard to distinguish between the two as practitioners described their own motivation for working in WELL as being intricately associated with the professional results for the learners and the client companies.

'I think, a lot of people would be supportive of the whole philosophy of WELL I know that's what keeps me in it ... The Program really ... supports and encourages ... social equity ... I very strongly believe in what WELL is all about and just empowering people who mightn't otherwise have the opportunity to develop skills is a real buzz for me. Margaret Reagan, Vic

Underlying each of these two categories was a sense of social justice provided for learners by giving them access to learning they might never have accessed in any other way. In the short stories of learners, the WELL practitioners highlighted the personal growth learners gained by developing their LLN skills and, sometimes, the learning they could take home with them.

It was also important to the practitioners that the companies could see the benefits of the program. One practitioner described helping a CEO with his monthly company update speech for the employees, helping him use language they would understand.

So it is important to the practitioners that everyone within the company is satisfied with the program.

I think some of the key benefits, ... see ... the employer and employee satisfied and singing the praises of a WELL program. That the program has worked. ... They are saying, "This is a really great program. It's worked. It's benefited us as an employer". The bottom line in business is it's benefited our employees, we're retaining them and they are progressing in their learning and training so that's fantastic ... I don't know if we talked about support and resources ... there are great resources on DEEWR and out there in the workplace. They still always have to be tweaked to that individual company and so it's still quite a unique program so I suppose it's those things I love about it.... And I'm still learning new things and I'm still finding out new things. Gaining from other colleagues, ... from DEEWR and from the WELL practitioners network, all the resources that are there. Yeah, really wonderful program, it works, it really works. Maureen Wren NSW

Maureen lists two of the supports many of the other WELL practitioners raised: DEEWR and other WELL practitioners. Other supports practitioners noted were based within the companies – the managers and the learners. Providing an effective WELL program requires the WELL practitioner to work cooperatively with everyone in the company. As pointed out by Suzanne Blakemore from Hunter Institute in NSW, WELL practitioners don't have ownership of the learning environment. Other practitioners noted the need to establish good working relationships with everyone in the company from managers to learners/employees. In some respects, this could be seen to extend the idea in adult learning theory that adults learn best when they are engaged in activities that have meaning for them, include them in the planning and development of activities, and recognise their skills and knowledge. This is equally so with companies.

The WELL practitioners noted that time must be spent building relationships with people in the company and in learning to do things as they are done in the company. Many WELL practitioners will describe how they learnt the skills for aged care or for some process within a manufacturing environment to enable them to understand what is required of the learners/employees. In the process, the WELL practitioner can develop a relationship with the learners and their supervisors/managers that is highly cooperative and productive. The best learning outcomes are sometimes not those listed in the training application but those that enable employees to go on learning after the WELL program is finished. These kinds of outcomes relate to employees developing confidence as learners and in being able to use their new skills at work, immediately.

The close cooperative development and delivery of training in the workplace, the way in which that delivery can be highly customised to the workplace and the immediacy of the outcomes of learning led some WELL practitioners to feel that there could be little or no transfer to classroom delivery. Indeed, some are disinclined to return to classroom delivery. This was not true of all the practitioners. Some reported that they had been invited to provide some delivery back in their institute because of their workplace experience. The skill in negotiating delivery and content with learners was also a feature some felt could be used in the classroom. If there was one hesitation they all shared it was the way in which WELL training can place the learner's needs before outcomes.

The focus in most of the practitioner's answers was on the non-teaching skills needed to make a WELL program effective. These, as noted above, included being able to consult and work with employees and managers – in a sense, client relationship management skills. The WELL practitioners also noted that the ability to adapt and be creative with whatever occurred on the work site was important. Sometimes it is necessary to go out and find the learners, or change the intended learning because something has come up since the practitioner was last on site. While this is happening, the WELL practitioner must also manage the program – staying within the parameters set by the funding application, delivering within AQTF guidelines and maintain their training organisation's reporting and recording requirements.

There was some difference of opinion between the WELL practitioners on whether or not it is possible for someone who is 'happy' in the classroom to make the shift to workplace delivery. The telling factors are often categorised as 'attributes': curiosity, creativity, adaptability, and boldness. Without explicitly stating it, the practitioners also described a role where the practitioner must be able to work alone – perhaps not seeing another practitioner for weeks at a time. Paradoxically, colleagues also figured highly as supports, especially in the early stages of a practitioner's career in WELL delivery.

So while they often work in isolation from their colleagues, the WELL practitioners were unanimous in emphasising the importance of inducting new WELL practitioners and of providing a mentor. Through mentoring with a more experienced WELL practitioner the skills to consult with a company, to plan and deliver an effective program and to troubleshoot a range of issues can be imparted as the need arises. Thus, it was suggested a number of times that a mentoring program should be 'more than lip service' and possibly extend to a year or more as a new WELL practitioner experiences programs in different industry sectors.

Non-teaching skills dominated the WELL practitioners' responses. Appropriate qualifications in language, literacy and numeracy did not go unmentioned but it was largely assumed that any WELL practitioner would have these. And while a few practitioners noted that they were able to draw on their VET colleagues to do 'spots' for them, most of the WELL practitioners seem to get their technical support directly from the company they are working in.

A significant point raised by several WELL practitioners related to employment. WELL delivery is funded for one year. Many WELL practitioners work as sessional staff. It becomes very hard to sustain this type of employment, especially as work periods for WELL do not fall within the standard semester pattern of most post-compulsory education. Thus a WELL practitioner may complete a program mid-semester when other job offerings are usually scarce. This makes it very hard for people to stay within WELL.

Acting on what was said

An effective WELL practitioner will:

- have a sound education in language, literacy and numeracy teaching skills
- be able to demonstrate project management skills including scoping a program, planning, and consultation and negotiation skills
- learn on the job the information needed to establish a cooperative learning environment with all levels of management on a work site
- be able to adapt to highly variable working conditions and complete a program within project milestones

A satisfied WELL practitioner can:

- learn the skills needed to run an effective WELL program with the assistance of more experienced colleagues
- work effectively with managers and employees
- see the impact of their teaching on learners'/employees' work and personal lives

An effective and satisfied WELL practitioner will also be one who can be sure of steady employment.

With the development of the National Foundation Skills Strategy the need to integrate LLN (and employability skills) across all areas of delivery is becoming urgent. To do this teaching staff will need to learn to work cooperatively in areas where they have limited experience or learning, to negotiate delivery to ensure all skills are covered effectively and to identify their learners' needs. While there are many disciplines where elements of these skills apply, and where consulting with employers is common, it may only be WELL practitioners who must do it on a daily basis, face to face with the employer and the employee who want to see immediate returns for their time... and be able to carry on with their skill development when the educationalist has gone.

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As Tony Greenrod, SA, noted

So ...we may be working on a quality system or quality documentation processes but there's also opportunity there for making a difference at an individual level. So recently ... the opportunity came up to link an Aboriginal carer with a course that would let her become a physiotherapy assistant. That's potentially life-changing for that person and our caravan moves on, but that seed's been planted. You can make a difference to individual people as well.

Industry often talks about knowledge management – it's not always about knowledge as education understands it. However, with the developments likely to arise from the Foundation Skills Strategy it might be time for training organisations to look at their structures and work out how they can capture and retain the skills and knowledge WELL practitioners have learnt.