

Executive Summary

This research report is the outcome of 12 months' research structured by the *Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era* research project. The research project was jointly funded by the Department of Education, Science and Training and TAFE NSW. The project involved, besides the research team, a Working Group, a National Reference Group and wider audiences for feedback on research work in progress. This wider feedback was obtained through journal articles, face-to-face forums, website publications, presentations to management groups and workshops.

The purpose of the project was to develop a business framework for professional development that assists and guides workforce planning and development practices in Vocational and Technical Education (VTE) in the Knowledge Era. The outputs of the research reported here are designed for managers as they support new directions in capability development of the VTE workforce and for individuals and groups seeking to apply new strategies and approaches to capability development in VTE.

Background

The *Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era* research project has progressed the research undertaken in the *Working and Learning in Vocational Education and Training in the Knowledge Era* research project (2003-04). The project is also a response to the changing context of VTE as reported in contemporary (2003-05) research reports and papers, research that has identified the need for:

- capacity building approaches rather than compliance approaches in the training package environment
- meeting the changing nature and needs of the workforce
- new pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching and innovation
- strategies that will break down many of the barriers that learners face, and
- increasing integration of working and learning.

The *Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era* research project has been a companion research project to the ongoing research of ICVET focused on pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in VTE, and complements current research and programs in VTE, including the Training and Assessment Training (TAA) Package, Unit of Competency TAAENV501A Maintain and Enhance Professional Practice, and the NCVER Consortium Research Program Supporting VET Providers in Building Capability for the Future (December 2004 – December 2006).

Methodology

The methodology informing this research was an eclectic one, drawing on phenomenology, hermeneutics and dialogue. The project consisted of two main phases. Phase 1 was concerned with the development of the theoretical basis for professional development in the Knowledge Era including concepts, models and strategies. The research team and the working group were the primary actors in this phase of the research. Regular working papers were provided to the national reference group for feedback on the direction that the research was taking. Phase 2 involved wider dissemination of research work in progress, seeking feedback from people in the field and discussion of the practical application of the emerging findings through a business framework.

Informing the research in its latter phase were 'think pieces' commissioned by TAFE NSW ICVET.

The report: Life based learning: an approach for capability development in Vocational Training and Education

This final report of the *Designing Professional Development for the Knowledge Era* research project is entitled *Life based learning: a strength based approach for capability development in Vocational Training and Education*. The substantive parts of the report are commentaries on vision and values, key concepts from the literature, and links between these concepts and contemporary work environments. These are followed by an exposition of the key findings from the research. The final parts of the report address the application issues associated with the key findings of the research.

Vision and values

The research is premised on a vision of VTE business environments as flexible, dynamic, risk-taking and self-sustaining systems. The vision for learners in VTE is that they work with teachers and trainers who passionately believe in learning and in helping others to learn and to reach their potential. This vision includes rich and diverse learning environments that incorporate continuous inquiry and development that is both adaptable to continually changing environments and sustainable and resilient in the business context of VTE.

The research identified a set of values that are emerging as fundamental to living and working in the Knowledge Era, values that need to be reclaimed in the workplace. Significant amongst these values are:

- **for the self:**
 - trustworthiness, honesty, integrity, engagement, selflessness, equanimity
- **with others:**
 - generosity, collaboration, humility, openness, tolerance
- **together as a group:**
 - taking responsibility instead of blaming others
 - planning and implementing wisely
 - being positive and looking beyond the immediate impact
 - balancing personal and work needs
 - being supported in taking risks
 - supporting community.

Values are seen as a key feature of any culture. The attributes of values that have been recognised in the research include the need for developmental values as well as values for 'end results' such as goals, and a balance between the two.

Key concepts

Four key concepts were identified as highly relevant to capability development in VTE. These are *Knowledge Era – the environment*, *Learning ecologies – the metaphor*, *Strength based philosophy – the mindset* and *Business wisdom – the actions*.

Knowledge Era – the environment

The research acknowledges the complexity of the VTE sector, a sector whose environment is dynamic, diverse and characterised by constant change. The VTE environment is now experiencing the effect of a global shift, the dawn of the Knowledge Era.

Knowledge work associated with the Knowledge Era has been identified by this research as a key generic capability. This form of work is non-linear and non-routine, more intuitive, opportunistic and networked, and less driven by allegiance to a pre-planned critical path or a mindset, and therefore more innovative. Knowledge workers in the VTE sector reflect this generic capability when they:

- balance work, learning and knowing
- undertake research
- rapidly acquire new skills

- apply existing skills and knowledge to new problems, based on high pattern-recognition skills
- problem-solve and make sense in new contexts
- maintain a balance between productivity and creativity, and
- collaborate in both face-to-face and virtual environments.

In the shift to the Knowledge Era, knowledge workers will need to accept the challenge of working and learning within contemporary environments where contradictory forces ebb and flow. Key capacities to build and sustain the environmental shift underway include:

- capacity to foster sharing and nurturing
- capacity to support groups
- immediate applicability of professional development
- flexible and responsive leadership, and
- clear corporate goals.

Learning ecologies – the metaphor

The research team identified ‘ecology’ as an effective metaphor for providing enhanced meaning to the conceptual basis of the project. ‘Ecology’ embraces the idea of contradictory forces within a sustaining and dynamic system; ‘opposites in co-existence’ with the dawning of the Knowledge Era. The research team adapted this metaphor to that of ‘learning ecologies’, a metaphor that directly enhances understanding of what needs to be done in developing capability in VTE in the Knowledge Era.

Learning ecologies are dynamic, adaptive and diverse. From an exploration of these dimensions of this key metaphor, the research claims that the learning ecologies metaphor offers capability development in VTE freedom from seeking out **the one way to get it right** or **the solution**. More importantly, the learning ecologies metaphor draws our attention to a way of looking at the world that is intuitive, caring and responsible.

The image developed by the research team of an approach and framework for, and the experiences to be had in, capability development in VTE that are implicit in the learning ecologies metaphor include the following caveats:

- This approach is not about precision or pre-determined ways of doing things. Rather than being predictive, it is anticipative.
- It is a permissive framework which means there may be tension and irritation as there are no clear answers. It is a *why* to rather than a *how* to approach.
- Some of it will be wrong and this will help to create the shifts.
- It favours successive approximations rather than exactness.
- Fuzziness is its strength. Fuzziness is a precise concept that provides a framework for understanding chaos.
- Self-organising happens in an ecology, but there may be no satisfactory explanation for where the organising pattern comes from.

Strength based philosophy – the mindset

The transition to the Knowledge Era is compatible with organisational change processes that move away from familiar deficit models which identify what is wrong before proceeding to ‘fix it’ using intervention strategies. The emerging paradigm for organisational change is based on asset or strength based approaches for individual and organisational growth and change.

Essentially, these models focus on collaboratively identifying what’s right and working well and then investing in increasing that. The research identified positive psychology as the key underpinning theoretical discipline for a strength based orientation to capability development in VTE.

Two key ideas from positive psychology are authentic happiness and signature strengths. In addition, the research drew on flow theory. Flow theory is an evolutionary model based on being conscious of our inescapable interconnectedness and being willing to devote some of our energy to the wellbeing of others. The concept of flow is aligned to the ‘engaged life’ as described in positive psychology, a mindset concept that is highly compatible with the connectedness embedded in the learning ecologies metaphor.

Business wisdom – the actions

Business wisdom is built on the principles and practices of organisational learning and knowledge management and is usually associated with knowledge, intelligence and experience (Hays 2005). However wisdom is greater than these attributes. It is about how the linking and leveraging based on knowledge, intelligence and experience sits within a business. It is about how these work together to promote learning and wisdom.

The concept of wisdom, which is central to all aspects of this research project, has the following qualities:

- Wisdom is strength based: it contributes to human wellbeing and the common good.
- Wisdom contributes to synthesis: wise thinking and actions pull components together into an integrated whole.
- Wisdom is achievement-oriented: it has a very practical orientation and serves to guide thinking and action.

From this summary of wisdom, as aligned to the other key concepts central to capability development, the research argued that wise thinking and wise actions are the glue that connects the different elements of a learning organisation into a more integrated and productive whole, strengthening what is already working.

The research team drew on the think piece produced by Miller and Miller (2006) to capture an expanded perspective on wisdom leadership. This piece described four distinct frames of reference for wisdom leadership that have emerged over the last 100 years: paternal-mechanical, humanistic, holistic and spiritual. The way a business is conducted is influenced by which of these frameworks (or combinations of them) leaders draw on for their wisdom.

This research would argue that a focus on business wisdom is particularly relevant to capability development in the Knowledge Era as it affirms the central role of human development, life management and striving to be the best that we can be for the benefit of others and ourselves.

Linking concepts to contemporary work environments – invited contributions

This section of the report (Part 4) was informed by papers (think pieces) commissioned by TAFE NSW ICVET. All authors were briefed by the research team. These papers are:

- **Richard Slaughter** (2005) *Emerging paradigms in the Knowledge Era*
- **Richard Hall** (2006) *Workplace changes: change and continuity in the workplaces of the future*
- **Avril Henry** (2006) *The changing face of the workforce and intergenerational impacts*
- **Robert K. Critchley** (2006) *The ageing workforce – to rewire or rust*
- **William and Debra Miller** (2006) *Wisdom leadership: exploring its relation to spirituality*

These papers have been compiled into a publication called *Voices: Contemporary thinking for working and learning in the Knowledge Era* and can be accessed from the ICVET website (<http://www.icvet.edu.au>).

Key findings

This research project has produced three key findings. These findings are:

1. Capability development is the new emphasis for working and learning in VTE.
2. A strength based orientation to capability development is most effective for change.
3. Life based learning is a contemporary framework for capability development in VTE.

These findings have been developed into a model for capability development in VTE.

Emphasizing capability development

The research identified a need to move beyond the terminology of professional development; it was seen by participants in the project as restrictive. Capability development was accepted as being more aligned with the discourse emerging from this research. Capability development reclaims the importance of people and the human aspect as well as reinforcing the importance of business imperatives.

The assumptions that underlie this preference for a new terminology are that capability development:

- addresses the needs of the organisation, workforce, individuals and groups
- supports a high degree of flexibility in the organisation
- provides a wide range of learning options
- occurs in relationship and focuses on people rather than place and structure
- provides support for learning through mistakes
- responds to the shifting nature of priorities
- is available to all in the organisation
- involves a combined responsibility by both the individual and the organisation
- is recognised as occurring through many processes and everyday activities
- ranges from organisational learning to personal learning, and on and off-the-job learning
- suits the 'organic', open-system nature of the Knowledge Era, and
- recognises both the individual and social processes that coexist and underpin learning in the Knowledge Era.

Creating capability is about:

- moving away from segmented activities to holistic activities that have more meaning and purpose
- positive appreciative mindsets and approaches
- creating balance and integration, with a seamless connection between work, learning and knowing
- empowering people to apply their expertise as people, rather than procedures or information, as the best source of deep expertise, and
- reciprocal obligation between the individual and the organisation: that is, people taking responsibility for their own self-directed learning and organisations creating environments that support learning.

Capability development is about supporting people in being *confident, capable, connected, curious and committed learners* who interact with their environments so that they are in dynamic balance between life and work, resulting in effective and appropriate actions at work.

Strength based orientation

A strength based orientation to capability development does not disregard or displace existing practice in the professional development field because its premise is that we take the best with us and integrate it into the new. Learners need to be able to access a wide range of diverse and personalised strategies and to take responsibility for their learning processes. Each learner is unique and needs to select from options that are available within the parameters of the business. These choices are not 'free-for-all'; they exist within the reality of the work environment and the boundaries necessary for individual, team and organisational success. This is best achieved through integrating strategies that incorporate age-old values and truths, established professional development practices, emerging strategies and openness to future options.

Many established strategies are already strength based. The idea is to build more mindfully on these strengths. Established strategies identified as strength based include conversations, action learning and coaching. Mentoring was seen as conducive to working from strength, but the research uncovered cautions and an understanding that mentoring in itself was not the strength; its potential strength came from how it was executed.

Emerging and future strategies have been specifically designed from a strength based orientation. They include, but are not limited to, critical conversations, Appreciative Inquiry (AI), talent management, disruptive technologies and positive deviance. They form part of a diverse approach to capability development in the Knowledge Era.

The critical factor and essential characteristic of these new strategies for capability development is that they are based on a thorough understanding of life based learning. Strategies used within the work based learning model may also reflect the characteristics of life based learning. The research identified the importance of appreciating the theoretical base of a life based learning model for capability development and of using selected strategies wisely and with good judgement.

Life based learning

This project proposes that life based learning is a plausible and contemporary framework for capability development in VTE. Further, the project proposes, through the concept of life based learning, that learning **for** work is not restricted to learning **at** work. Life based learning acknowledges **multiple sources** of learning, which opens up opportunities for developing capability. Life based learning substantially shifts the discourse about professional development by moving beyond the allegiance to work based and expert-centred learning. While honouring their legacy, retaining what works and drawing out their potential, it places them into a more contemporary framework.

Life based learning has a different focus from lifelong learning in that it is more about the source of learning, acknowledging the whole person's learning contribution and recognising the different ways in which learning is significant to the individual. Life based learning allows for more of the 'whole' person to be present in learning and at work. It adds to the possibilities for learning and development in VTE and provides opportunities to build on current practices. Life based learning acknowledges that what we experience and learn outside a work environment can be as important to our work as what we experience and learn at work. What life based learning makes explicit is that individuals have knowledge, skills and capabilities that are not always visible or recognised by organisations even though they can significantly contribute to organisational life.

The ten key characteristics of life based learning identified by the research are that it:

- emphasises capability development
- promotes a strength based orientation to learning
- recognises multiple sources of learning
- balances integrity and utility
- shifts responsibility for learning to the individual
- shifts the role of organisations to that of enabler
- acknowledges that contradictions are strengths
- invests in developing the whole person
- acknowledges human dispositions as critical, and
- appreciates that change means things are qualitatively different.

The true strength of these key characteristics is in their interconnectedness. Life based learning embraces the best of expert-centred learning and work based learning, offering a broader repertoire. It expands the

potential of existing models, offering new possibilities and articulating explicitly what many VTE practitioners are intuitively engaging with already. It better serves the needs of working and learning in the dynamic VTE environment.

Life based learning creates a model for capability development specified in terms of knowledge, skills, abilities and values. The emphasis is on personal responsibility for learning through the provision of rich learning environments, with the learning benefiting both the individual and the organisation. Life based learning is adaptive, self-facilitated, based on whole-of-life perspectives and reflexive practice, and uses any strategy appropriate for the task.

There are three distinguishing features of life based learning critical to this new model:

- an emphasis on a strength based orientation rather than strategy
- explicit recognition of underpinning foundation truths and values including trust, mindfulness, consideration and tolerance, and
- acknowledgement of the learner as a whole person who accesses many sources of learning.

The research in its second phase identified benefits and outcomes of the life based learning model for capability development. The key benefits were that it:

- articulated and legitimised what was familiar and known intuitively
- proposed a way forward that was within reach
- expanded the perspective of learning, which had the potential to open up more opportunities; it was considered more productive to reduce and blur the artificial boundaries that currently compartmentalise the context of learning
- legitimised life experiences as a key source of learning; it reinforced the fact that learning is transferable, and that 'harvesting' learning from one context and sowing it in another was a very practical, achievable and productive initiative, and
- acknowledged the whole person, which in turn had potential for utilising individual talents in better and smarter ways; this could benefit both the individual and the organisation.

The types of life based learning experiences participants in the research described generally fell into three categories: 1) significant life events, 2) developing a talent, and 3) recreational interests.

Phase 2 of the research project identified anticipated outcomes of a life based learning model for VTE organisations and businesses. These are divided into various components including vision, people, work, work style, environment and resulting outcomes for business.

Application

The research report includes a discussion of guiding principles for applying a life based learning model of capability development to businesses. Six guiding principles for action are identified. These are:

- believe relationships really matter
- work with strengths
- be reflexive, as well as reflective
- think and act wisely
- acknowledge the whole person, and
- move beyond professional development as an activity.

Further, organisational enablers are included in this application section of the report, as a guide to providing rich learning environments that promote capability development for individuals and teams through a model of life based learning. The eight organisational enablers identified by the research are:

- Valuing connections and networks.
- Developing a culture that supports job reshaping for personal growth.
- Creating space for exchange and sharing of ideas (informal learning).
- Supporting learners as designers of their own development.
- Balancing control and creativity.
- Modelling wise leadership.
- Capitalising on the benefits of an intergenerational workforce.
- Focusing on futures *in* education.

The researchers also explored application details of strength based approaches to capability development within a life based learning model. Here the focus is on emerging approaches. Application details for conversations, talent management, positive deviance, Appreciative Inquiry and disruptive technology are fleshed out.

The application section of the report concludes with a discussion of evaluation for capability development in the Knowledge Era noting that such an evaluative process will be full of paradoxes and questions. Importantly, if evaluation in general seeks to establish the value or worth of an activity or program, is it possible to evaluate capability development using traditional approaches?

The research indicates that capability development, as an innovation, demands fresh and distinctly different approaches to evaluation. Two approaches to evaluation are canvassed: Appreciative Inquiry (AI) and Most Significant Change (MSC). These approaches take into account simultaneous development on multiple levels while recognising multiple stakeholders (organisation, team, the individual), each of whom will have different expectations of evaluation and will use evaluation measures in different ways.

Concluding remarks

The researchers believe that life based learning offers a way forward at a time when many Industrial Era processes are no longer working. It opens the way to re-energising people, honouring what has worked well in the past and realigning current and emerging strategies to a strength based orientation. The potential of life based learning has been summed up by a National Action Planning Forum participant thus:

Life based learning seems initially a utopian/fantasy notion, but we live in a complex world. The notion is an honest attempt to capture the full breadth of our humanity, and apply it to our working life. I associate the idea of life based learning with my reading of classical studies and science fiction, where writers deal with the possible and not the absurd. The possibility that humanity can set out to explore the stars.

Life based learning articulates what many people know and feel. It provides a framework for application to capability development in the VTE sector. This is further explored in the companion document to this research report, *A Business Approach to Capability Development: considerations and suggestions for customising and applying life based learning in the workplace* (available on the TAFE NSW ICVET website: <http://www.icvet.edu.au>).