The learner, the learning and the workplace: Strengthening learning outcomes through the entwinning of three, possibly conflicting, cultural orientations

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Abstract

Drawing from experience and related research of the authors, this paper suggests a teacher approach to strengthening vocational education and training outcomes through acknowledging and working with the respective cultural influences of what a learner brings to the learning, the nature of the learning environment and the character of the workplace to which the outcomes of the learning are reasonably anticipated to be applied. Whilst some aspects of these cultures may potentially be in conflict, embedding attention to these issues within the learning diminishes the possibility of tension, strengthens the learning and enhances the prospects of useful transfer to the workplace. Whilst this paper arises from Australian experience, it is offered as having wider relevance.

This is a work-in-progress and thus far a “one size fits all” definitive approach has not been revealed. However, there is generic potential for much to be gained through engaging the parties, throughout the learning, in purposeful “Entwining of Cultures” conversation leading to real, mutual, understanding and appropriate commitment.

Introduction – Offering assistance to the VET teacher

Firstly, we begin with explaining what this paper is not. We are not attempting to add to the already large body of work which variously addresses the complexity of cross-cultural issues which are becoming increasingly important in a globalising world as exampled by Schrottner and Hofer (eds) (2008) and Weber (2003, pp. 157 – 177). Rather, our purpose is to offer an approach to a vocational education and training VET teacher1 in the circumstances of their acting to strengthen learning outcomes of a class group where issues of culture – personal and organisational – inevitably influence the pursuit of such an objective.

In this paper - A view of what is meant by “culture”:

Given the diversity of what is understood to be meant by culture, the authors of this paper use the term to convey the notion of beliefs and behaviour which shape an individual’s or an organisation’s approach to engaging in learning, valuing learning outcomes and drawing upon the outcomes of learning. In these respects, the “values” of an individual or an organisation are entwined with “culture”.

This view of “culture” is not stereotyping and applies to individual and organisation circumstances. In both instances, but possibly more so for organisations, it may be the case that institutional influences such as the coercive, normative and mimicry carriers - Ogawa et al. (2008, pp 90-91) drawing upon (Scott 1995) - are profound shapers of cultural pre-dispositions.

This paper is grounded in the logic that strengthening outcomes from VET is of value to the learner, the workplace in which the outcomes from learning are to be applied, and to the provider of the learning - be it as part of workplace learning or institutional learning outside the workplace. In achieving these values there are cultural (broadly defined) influences as exampled below.

1 Whilst this paper is focused upon VET, there is much resonance with higher education – both in terms of cause-and-effect and action to strengthen outcomes. Also, whilst the authors have a particular interest in contributing to the expansion of workplace learning as a formal inclusion in the delivery of VET, the paper is orientated more to supporting the VET teacher than to the workplace trainer. The authors, for the instance of this paper, have chosen a VET teacher orientation because it is the VET institution which awards the qualification and therefore has a quality compliance obligation and consequent lead role.
Example resolving of cultural (broadly defined) tensions -

A learner may be culturally (possibly ethnically) orientated to not question or assert opinion; and there may be an expectation that having paid the fee, and attended classes, qualification will follow. In such a case, a teacher – with normative (professional expectations) educational influences – is presented with a challenge in nurturing within the learner a valuing of engaging actively with the learning in a manner which is appropriate (but possibly evolutionary) with respect to their culture; and can be appropriately applied to the culture from which they come – if they are returning to this culture. The outcome being that the learner values the learning experience, the VET teacher values the learner and there is future valuing in the workplace to which the learning is transferred.

As a consequence of their life background, a learner might be under the influence of peer shaped culture - such as unemployed surf-culture youth resistant to forced engagement with training so as to preserve social benefits - which is not compatible with the organisation culture of the provider. At first, this is disruptive to the learning, but with perseverance and sensitivity, the teacher succeeds in establishing a partnership with the learner. In such a case, the teacher and the learner seek and find reason to value each other and each learns something from the other.

A part-time student may find rejection in their workplace of what they progressively bring as an outcome from their learning. Positions such as “We don’t do it here that way” or “Forget that theoretical rubbish, this is the real world” may arise because the workplace culture is resistant to change. Under these circumstances, the teacher has a challenge (actually an obligation as employability skills are embedded within Australian VET competencies) in supporting the learner to achieve a mutually valuing relationship with their work colleagues. Also, this is connected to achieving and sustaining mutual valuing between the VET provider and the employing organisation.

Where the workplace is formally part of the learning environment, it could occur that the culture of the VET provider, with respect to facilitating learning, is markedly different to that of the workplace learning environment. It could be the case that one or the other environments is predisposed to empowering inquiry by the learner and the other is highly autocratic. Under these circumstances, the VET teacher must be alert to the situation and take action to resolve the differences on behalf of the learner; and in a manner which strengthens the relationship between the provider and the workplace.

A learner might be culturally inclined (for whatever cultural reason) to be passive and under-value what they might contribute to the learning. This situation might be compounded by traditions within the work environment which act against the learner being fully engaged as a learner and valued within the workplace. In such a case, the teacher (and the provider organisationally) has a role to play in awakening the learner to their worth and consequently asserting a learning influence upon the workplace culture which brings about valuing of the learner and the learning.

Within a class group there may be cultural differences creating tensions within the learning environment; and this may include the teacher and/or aspects of the provider culture. Under this circumstance, an intervention is required – possibly by a VET manager – to nurture mutual respect within the parties as the core of bringing about valuing each other and the learning experience.

A learner might be preparing for a career in which there are apparent workplace cultural hurdles, for them, to be overcome. For example, gender, ethnicity, age, perceived disability, etc. issues may need to be confronted and overcome. Accordingly, as a supporting example, the teacher and fellow learners can be of assistance by sharing ideas about strategies that may be appropriate. In many countries, including Australia, there are legislative anti-discrimination laws and regulations aimed at prevention of any such difficulties, but such issues do arise still and are frequently reported in the popular press as well as gaining notoriety in the courts. In some instances, in workplaces that are seen as more robust and physically-based, the issues can surface in bullying and harassment ways, but defended as “just a bit of fun”.

The above examples are indicative snapshots of reality as we have experienced it. Our experience and research gives rise to the proposition that there is much to be gained in strengthening VET delivery by seeking a status where each of the parties values the other and particularly values that they are valued – i.e. the “valuing” is overt and mutual.

One of the issues inherent in discussions of VET learning is that there has been a history of identifying the activity as “training” and discussions of the area of workplace learning have also utilised dichotomies such as “informal” versus “formal” to indicate institutional teaching/learning from “on-the-job” learning. Inherent
in the underlying value system of such dichotomies has been a hierarchical value that has placed the institutional teaching/learning above the informal.

Our issues here are that the learners and the learning for and in workplaces, and indeed the whole VET enterprise, involve an entwining of a range of learning and teaching values that can produce tensions unless they are taken into serious account. The location of the learning and the value accorded to it because of this “place” element has been discussed by Calms and Malloch (2010) as a feature of re-defining workplace learning for the 21st century.

**A taxonomy of cultures potentially influencing VET outcomes and their relationship to being “capably competent”**

The experience of the authors suggests that there are three categories of culture which potentially influence the VET experience and its outcomes. These are – traditional cultures; social cultures; and organisation cultures.

**Traditional cultures:**

The following are windows to what we mean by “traditional culture” - The Dockery (2009) findings that Australian Indigenous people have better outcomes when strongly connected to their cultural roots; commentary by Goldman (1975, p. 47) upon the biblical origins of the continuing purpose of Jewish people’s lifelong learning ‘The ultimate test of the value of Jewish learning is whether it leads to better Jewish living in one’s daily life’; conventions relating to respect for others which influence the nature of expressing of views and communication; and tensions arising between the values and expectations of the Australian post-secondary system and the values and expectations of different national learner groups.

As Reagan (2000) has clearly indicated in his book, there are wide ranging differences amongst different cultures that are “non-western”. For example, differences that impact upon learning styles and expectations leading to misunderstandings and cultural mismatches in western teaching contexts. For us, “traditional culture” is what typically first comes to mind when the matter of “culture” is raised and gives rise to possible ethnic orientated stereotyping which can be widely off the mark regarding an individual.

**Social cultures:**

In our taxonomy, social culture is that set of beliefs and behaviours which become embedded as a consequence of a person’s associations with a group and identifying with the beliefs, values and behaviour of the group. Whilst there is also the possibility of inappropriate stereotyping, it may be that the individual is highly likely to act in accord with what they perceive as appropriate to the social culture with which they identify at the time. Social cultures tend to be life-style orientated such as various youth cultures; socio-economic attitudinal and behaviour predispositions including professional institute, union and workplace norms; generational groupings; and religion based orientations to belief and value positions.

In a VET learning environment, it may be the case that finding common ground between initially colliding social cultures is more challenging than is the case for respecting and acting appropriately with regard to traditional cultures – need not as apparent and hence weak personal inclination to “accommodate”.

**Organisation cultures:**

Organisational cultures arise over time under the influence of prime-moving people and possibly in alignment with institutional influences such as the coercive, normative, and mimicry carriers (Ogawa et al 2008; Scott 1995). These cultures manifest as “the way things are done” and the “beliefs” which drive this. It is likely that other, somewhat different, sub-unit (teams, remotely located units, work shifts, etc) cultures reside within an organisational culture and may bring about change or be ultimately expelled – inviting consideration of evolution or revolution as organisations grow (Greiner, L. 1998).

Charles Handy (1993, p. 180) notes that organisational cultures are affected by past events, the climate of the present, technology and the type of work, along with organisation objectives and the type of people who work within the organisation. We agree, and hold that a VET teacher working in close association with an organisation must be cognisant of these shaping influences and respectful of the outcomes.
The entwining of cultures

Although the cultures in our taxonomy are of different character, they do co-exist and influence VET outcomes regarding what the student acquires and the manner in which this has value to them and to others. These influencing cultures variously present within the entwining cultures of the learner, the VET provider and the workplace.

The relationship between these entwined cultures has been an abiding theme in the research by one of us into people making the most of what they know and can do – as illustrated by John’s case.

John’s Case

During 2008 research (Hughes 2008a) into what is required to encourage men 45+ years of age to undertake formal learning for career changing purposes, John emerged as a highly informing case. John is a one time construction worker who injured his back necessitating a change in career – he thought to employee welfare and employed by a union. This was motivated by his personal, union grounded, cultural pre-disposition to assisting people. However, in seeking appropriate VET qualification the enthusiasm of the VET teachers (one in particular) and the positive culture of the class group caused John to shift his goal to broader community work. With the benefit of hindsight, it was fortuitous that the TAFE Institute learning environment was welcoming and motivating – if this hadn’t been the case his commitment to a new career would have been in jeopardy and he would not have achieved professional qualification beyond his earlier expectations.

’When I was at school, as a kid, I debated. That was called arguing with the teacher. I asked questions. I wanted to know. But I was told that I was a smart arse. The thing about adult education was that that was encouraged. You know, group discussion was encouraged; and we learnt through that … I learnt more off the students than the teachers at times. And I thought that it was great that I was allowed to have an opinion. And I thought that that was great that I was allowed to have an opinion … as long as I listened to other people’s opinions.’ (John, line J 279 – interviewee Men 45+)

John, also had student placements where the values of the work environment were compatible with his values and the workplace was welcoming of what he could contribute and was highly motivating with respect to continuation of the learning. This was reassuring that his choice of new career was sound even though community services is culturally female dominated. Now, firmly entrenched, he has very successfully, and satisfyingly, moved from a “blokey” workplace culture to a nurturing, primarily “feminine”, culture.

John’s case is positive and points to the importance of having compatibility between the culture of the learner (and between learners), the culture of the VET provider and the culture of the workplace at which learning outcomes will be applied.

In the course of the men 45+ research, there were instances of the learning environment being insensitive to adult learners and contributing to non-completion of training – ‘… I think that the reason why I stopped the Oc Health and Safety course was that because the guy who was running that was the old form of teacher’ (Gordon, line G191 – Interviewee Men 45+). On a positive note, this research – albeit scoping in nature – pointed to correlation between a part-time student completing a qualification and a workplace culture which welcomed the transfer of learning outcomes and acted upon the same values possessed by the learner – there was cultural alignment between the learner and the work.

Whilst the culture applauded by John was highly motivating for him, our experience is that some learners are uncomfortable – at least initially – where the learning environment expects them to express opinions. For example, students from some far eastern/ Asian cultures hold expectations that teachers “teach” or impart and that students who question or debate are not showing appropriate respect for their educators. Others, from local or different western cultural backgrounds, who see themselves as experienced and already well qualified in their field, may see their “teacher” as somewhat out of date with the “real world” and become quite critical. In a number of fields and, at times, in higher education, this type of critical exchange can reflect very different values and cultural bases of the learners and the teachers.

In another early study conducted by one of us, a young female trade worker (18 years old) in the automobile industry reported that she had worked in three different auto industry sites before her then current organisation. In her previous three organisations she had been subjected to a range of
unacceptable colleague behaviours but found in her current organisation, where workplace learning took place on-site and collaboratively, that she soon became a team leader for a workplace learning project and “none of that stuff happens here!” This worker’s cultural experience led to her being very sure about the sort of culture she wanted and wished to feel comfortable within as she learned and worked. (Hase, Malloch, and Cairns, 1998).

The foregoing are illustrations of the potential conflicting of learner culture with the culture of the learning environment. In the case of John as compared to what has been experienced with some Asian learners, this points to what is applauded by one learner being uncomfortable to another. Another dimension of suitting the learning approach to cultural grounded expectations is illustrated by the experience with training Indigenous people in remote community infrastructure upgrading.

With a particular iconic project in mind (learning-wise managed and now reflected upon by one of us), facilitating VET learning to strengthen remote Indigenous communities presents a challenge in aligning the culturally grounded expectations of the trainees and the community with a conventional formal VET learning environment. In this case, some of the learning was within the community (the workplace) and some learning was residentially based away from the community. The training worked much better during the periods when the learning occurred in the community and the approach was informal and co-operative between learners and learner and teacher. This may point to the approach, as we have experienced, of an increased emphasis on learning through work in the workplace as different from learning in a more formal institutional environment such as a VET provider (be it a College or other arrangement).

In making this last point – supporting expansion of workplace learning as an embedded component of VET learning – it may be that there is a great deal to be learnt by looking to extrapolate broadly from the experience of facilitating learning for Indigenous people where the occurrence of entwining of cultures and values is more visible than in other circumstances.

Valuing values - “I value that you value what I value”

Whilst not always acknowledged, strengthening outcomes from VET is a value laden activity as presented in Figure 1. In essence, strong outcomes accrue where there is mutual valuing of the learning and the learning outcomes by the learner, the VET provider (through its teachers and other staff), and the people in the workplace to which the learning is being progressively transferred or ultimately will be applied – all of these people are actors in the activity of valuing learning and drawing upon its outcomes.

![Figure 1 – VET valuing associations](image)

Each of the actors in Figure 1 may have cultural orientated predisposition to differently value learning and its outcomes. For example, taking a dark view, a learner may initially expect to be taught as different from putting in the effort to learn, a VET provider may have reaching financial targets as its overarching organisational goal, and people in the workplace may be set in their ways and not welcoming of new ideas which they see as theoretical irrelevances. Some workplaces may see their role as more of a teaching and learning environment than others. There can be, for example, a culture of the workplace being seen as where the “real” learning takes place and an external (to the workplace) VET provider organisation being
seen as less than “real”. Alternatively, some workplaces see their supporting-of-learning role as peripheral or almost non-essential along the lines of “we send you to learn at the college, that’s what it is for”.

Research conducted by one of us into drawing upon the outcomes of lifelong learning to organisational advantage revealed the linkage between a person valuing what they (and others) know and can do, being nurtured in this regard by a supporting environmental culture and motivated to draw upon the outcomes of their learning (Hughes 2007a). Having now revisited this data from a cultural influence perspective, “culture” may manifest as traditional (national or historical, etc – “nature”), social (influence of peers and the like – “nurture”) or organisational (sometimes normatively supportive or sometimes coercive – “This is how we do it”) based.

The revisited data – across a number of studies by each of us - also reveals the importance of the Australian VET learning environment – institutionally, systemically and organisationally - valuing what learners bring and what they can thus contribute. In some classroom cultures, shaped by the teacher, the teacher’s stance is that the students are there to be taught more so than to be active contributors to the learning. These approaches also often see “the curriculum” (i.e. the VET specified targeted competencies) as the main game for student to demonstrate appropriate behaviours with understanding and more “lifewise” elements ignored completely. From the learner’s perspective, the welcoming and motivating nature of the learning environment is important; and thus the VET provider must consciously value what they provide to the learner and in satisfaction of learner expectations. There is pivotal importance in all actors (learner, provider, and workplace) valuing of self, valuing of others, and valuing the reciprocity of valuing – hence the notion of “valuing of valuing”.

Note: A word of “workplace” explanation – In Australia, the delivery of VET is focused upon meeting industry needs and there is a great deal of consultation in the development of required competencies. However, the notion of a partnership between VET provider and workplaces in the delivery of VET is not as advanced as appears to be the case in much of Europe. In this respect, “Between School and Work: New perspectives on transfer and boundary-crossing” (Tuomi-Grohn & Engestrom (eds.) 2003) is a useful alerting to the possibilities; and Chapter 1 (Tuomi-Grohn, et al. 2003) focuses the mind on acting upon the possibilities for moving from the general in learning outcomes to the specific as Saljo (2003, p.319) summarises the argument of Tuomi-Grohn and Engestrom (eds.) (2003). The question arises – “What would be the outcome for VET in Australia if the expectation is for industry to be an active actor in the facilitation of learning?” That is not just specifying competencies and demanding that needs be met, but contributing to delivery as a major plank in the “boundary crossing” bridge - noting that this has echoes of apprenticeship as traditionally known.

Given that 85.9% of Australian VET students are engaged with part-time studies (NCVER 2010), it is reasonable to assume that a significant proportion of these will be in employment related to their studies. Hence there is a current connection between the VET provider and the workplace; and the workplace is an extension of the learning environment even if not formally recognised as such in most situations. One shift that is being envisaged more across the international scene in VET and workplace learning is the consideration of the workplace as the site of the learning rather than a simple dichotomy of an external provider institution separate from the “workplace” per se.

Drawing from the experience of the authors, from the teacher’s perspective it is the culture of the VET provider organisation which is likely to be the principle shaping influence upon their approach to facilitating the learning. This needs to be set against the circumstances where a learner has strong connection to their culture which is likely to be the principle shaping influence upon their expectations and approach to the learning. Depending upon the degree of present connection which the learner and/or the provider have to a specific workplace, the workplace culture will be of immediate or future relevance.

2 Using “classroom” to include training groups which may not necessarily be in the physical setting of a classroom.

3 It is probable that the VET provider and the workplace have different institutional influences shaping their mode of operation. Under these circumstances the institutional coercive, normative and mimicry carriers (Ogawa et al. 2008 citing Scott 1995) will be different in character and possibly have conflicting impact as the environments join together as places of learning. For example, whereas the Australian Qualification Training Framework (AQTF) is a coercive (directed) requirement upon a VET provider, the workplace is unlikely to be subject to audit in this regard and therefore not inclined to take on the associated compliance stance.
The foregoing – provider, learner and workplace – are the three foundation cultures addressed in this paper. However, we acknowledge that there are cultures, within these cultures, where there is the potential for positive and/or negative interaction. We do have experience of teachers (under the influence of personal culture pre-dispositions) taking a different path to what is aligned with the provider culture; and there are frequently learner cultural differences within the class group. This is illustrated in Figure 2 for the purpose of demonstrating our awareness of this deeper dimension. Also, a similar complex contact between cultures frequently occurs in the workplace.

![Figure 2 – Entwining of cultures within the VET provider environment](image)

Noting that this is a work-in-progress, and including the workplace as at least a potential partner in VET delivery, the context in which this expansion of inquiry into strengthening VET is underway is illustrated in Figure 3.

![Figure 3 – Activity system representation of VET valuing associations](image)

The across education and industry experience (practice and research) of the authors is such that there is much to be gained – in both environments – by the institution of Australian VET moving to formally include the workplace as a valued learning environment. There is merit in exploring the proposition that expanding the learning environment strengthens the outcomes from the learning under conditions of appropriate quality assurance and respect for the shaping institutional influences in both environments.

In addition to being a conceptual framework for reflecting upon the activity of strengthening VET outcomes by attention to values, Figure 3 is a guiding foundation for constructing a purposeful conversation between the actors in which their respective values are made explicit and shaped so as to respect the values of others and to find mutuality. The “purposeful” quality of this conversation is to go beyond casual sharing to
consensus for action at the beginning and throughout the period of learning and confirmation of appropriate transfer to the workplace.

**VET teacher action to act upon the possibilities – the purposeful “CONVERSATION”**

The notion of valuing values – as presented in Figures 1and 3 – is offered as a device to bring the importance of the milieu of VET related values into the explicit realm of teacher action and, importantly, achieving a mutuality where each actor places high value upon their values being valued by the others in what should be a reciprocal relationship amongst learners, supervisors, colleagues and teachers.

Although there are numerous actors in the entwining of VET learning cultures, it is important that one of these actors takes a leadership role. Accordingly, we suggest that as the VET teacher is in the principal facilitating role (from a VET institutional perspective and balancing the coercive, normative and mimicry carrier influences institutionally associated with the entwined cultures) it is appropriate that the VET teacher is assigned as having the lead role in initiating and sustaining “the valuing” conversation; and that this conversation be purposeful – i.e. not just a casual event.

To be purposeful, the conversation is suggested as having the following characteristics –

- The objective is for the conversation to be a forum for actors to share views, regarding values and expectations, which strengthen the learning bond between them. Noting, that some (especially the learners) may choose to remain silent for some time pending finding their way into the conversation.
- The conversation yields specificity regarding the rules which apply in each of the learning environments and opens dialogue in how culturally grounded predispositions can accommodate to these rules. Noting that, especially in the case of learners, some tolerance of the “when” and the “how” may be required.
- Depending upon the “tightness” of the rules, some adjustment (evolution) of the rules may arise from the conversation. Noting that the Australian delivery of VET is tightly institutionalised by the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) and the Australian Quality Training Framework (AQTF) and that VET provider compliance is required. Also noting that, similarly, workplaces are subject to industrial rules and regulations which are of an institutional nature.
- The inclusion and empowering quality of the “strengthening of learning” conversation must be such that there is commitment by the actors to follow through on commitments made. Noting that we don’t learn and work in a perfect world and adjustment to commitments are to be expected. Indeed, the on-going nature of the conversation is an accommodation of this “changing world of learning and work”.
- The conversation is on-going throughout the period of learning and possibly, in some instances, continuing after graduation and initial transfer of outcomes to the workplace. Noting that there are logistical and resourcing limits to the depth and breadth of on-going conversation.

Whilst it might be said that the foregoing seems to be similar to a briefing with actors at the outset of a learning program, the difference lies in the making of commitments and the continuance of the conversation. This is not a once only event, but is an embedded and overtly apparent component of the learning activity as the actors continue to find “meeting of the minds” in the activity of strengthening the entwining of the respective cultures.

In suggesting that the conversation be embedded within the totality of the learning we have the view that this is not necessarily adding to the teaching load. Indeed, it is a way in which the mandated attention to dimensions of competency4 and employability skills5 can be explicitly addressed in an effective manner which adds to the prospect of graduating as capably competent6. Informed by experience and revisiting

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4 In Australian VET, dimensions of competency range across task skills, task management skills, contingency management skills and job/role environment skills. From the outset of the introduction of CBT in Australia these have been intended inclusions, but have slipped from overt attention (Hughes & Cairns 2009)
5 In Australian VET, employability skills range across communication, teamwork, problem solving, initiative and enterprise, planning and organising, self-management, learning and technology.
6 Hughes and Cairns (2009) posits that an Australian VET graduate should have a capacity beyond just being competent in familiar circumstances. The notion of “capably competent” is having the capacity apply knowledge and skill in unfamiliar and challenging circumstances.
previous research it is our view that the “purposeful conversation”, throughout the period of learning, accelerates the learning as sharing of views regarding the context (invariably culture entwining) of acquisition and then application of the knowledge and skill makes the learning more meaningful and valued by all. In particular, data arising from research by one of us (Hughes 2003) into aspects of strengthening VET learning in the contract cleaning and waste management industries reveal that “value” positions taken by learners, employers and VET teachers (frequently delivering in the workplace) are connected to the three cultures in our taxonomy; and the ease of learning facilitation is connected to the mutuality of valuing by all of these actors.

The first thing, there needs to be genuine commitment by the employer. The other end of the equation is there needs to be a genuine commitment by the employee [learner]. Because if we have those two working in unison then we are all heading in the same direction. (Terry, line 145 - VET teacher remarking upon the abiding difficulty of getting the employer and the learner (employee) mutually valuing and, hence, the teacher is able to effectively contribute.)

Whilst VET actors – students, teachers, and workplace personnel - invariably assert that they value what they bring and contribute and what others likewise do, their actions are not always in accord with their assertions. It is as though other pressures cause this commitment to slip from the conscious and acting mind; or there is a deliberate appeasing saying one thing and then willfully acting differently. This is exemplified in the reported instances of overseas professionally qualified people, participating in the Australian qualification, 21937VIC Certificate IV in ESL Employment / Professional Practice, asserting that they understand what is workplace culturally expected of them with respect to employability skills, but not acting in accord with this understanding. There are also instances of teachers lapsing back into facilitating in “teacher centred” mode rather than “learner centered”; and thus excluding drawing upon the “cultural” strengths within the class.

With respect to workplaces (including VET providers), there are instances of management reluctance to actually fully draw upon subordinates and/or not share knowledge as now more strongly revealed in the revisited data informing Hughes (2000, 2003, 2007a, 2007b, 2008a, 2008b). There are also both Australian VET provider and workplace instances of organisation cultures not being sensitive to traditional cultural issues within the learning or workplace environment. We are aware of classroom situations where there were cultural tensions between learners, and one of us was personally involved in resolving a number of cultural clashes (relating to learning and applying outcomes of learning) within workplaces where the organisational culture was pre-disposed to insensitivity in these matters. Teaming a Turkish Cypriot with a Greek Cypriot in learning to operate a multi million dollar highly sophisticated machine, at the time of the Cypriot civil war (leading to 1974 partition of Cyprus) between these cultures, is an iconic example of organisation insensitivity. The instance of an organisation – with reason2 but insensitively - determining that factory operator staff and secretarial staff were to use separate toilets is an example of unthinkingly placing a working-and-learning-together barrier between the two groups.

It could be that the degree to which a VET actor is acting upon “values” is related to the strength of their cultural commitment to learning. It is at least worth reflecting upon the possibility of wider extrapolation from the Dockery (2009) finding that Australian Indigenous people (urban and rural), with a strong attachment to their traditional culture, have better VET outcomes; and possibly influenced by a greater sense of self-esteem and personal identity and a close network of community support.

In anticipation of further research in this area, scoping conversations with Australian VET teachers indicate that consideration of cultural influences is narrower than what we have in mind. The notion of cultural differences beyond being ethnically determined, and including organisational issues, is not commonly in mind. This is understandable as, the focus has been upon the consequences of migration, attracting overseas students, and facilitating learning for Indigenous students. The need for a broader understanding of the multiplicity of cultural influences beyond simple “ethnic” stereotyping possibilities is a serious matter for the education of “teachers’ who work in the VET sector in Australia. Whilst there are aspects of diversity emphasised in most teacher education courses across the nation, this element may be more critical in VET teaching and learning than has been realised and attended to in the past.

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2 Relating to immigrant factory staff being unfamiliar with (or, possibly, not comfortable with) the use of a pedestal toilet.
Mindful of the unusual nature of our stance (at least in an Australian VET environment), we reiterate that in this paper the respective cultures are that of the learning environment, the culture of the learners broadly defined, and the prevailing culture of the workplace\(^8\) to which the outcomes of the learning are to be applied. These cultures potentially, each, impact upon the other and are entwined around the VET institutionally defined core of the learning as illustrated in Figure 4; and attention to these cultures through purposeful on-going conversation is a cocoon acting to strengthen the learning outcomes and the transfer to the workplace.

![Figure 4 – Entwined cultures around the core learning](image)

Cultural differences in a VET learning environment have the potential of being a source of richness in the learning experience or a cause of diminishing outcomes. On the positive side, there is much to be gained from knowing and respecting the cultural differences which apply across the milieu of learners, facilitators of learning as individuals and agents of the provider, institutional and workplace learning environments, and even the inherent culture of an occupation aligned to a learner’s learning. These differences present as vehicles for deepening learning through exploration of the strengthening influence of entwining cultures.

On the negative side, and especially with respect to personal culture orientations, lack of awareness or even willful exploitation of differences can occur; and at a loss to all.

Located within an enterprise training centre, an early experience of one of the authors involved bringing Indigenous (to a Pacific country) trainees to a Melbourne technical and production facility of a multi-national parent company. The purpose was for training in installing and maintaining communication equipment in their homeland. In this instance the culture of the learners had a casualness to learning character (including attending at a time of their choosing), the culture of the learning environment was an amalgam of Australian and European parent company corporate traditions with respect to approaches to training, and the "in-country living-and-doing" culture to which the learning outcomes where to be transferred was not, by nature, strongly aligned with the corporate expectations of the supplier of the communications facilities. In this instance, with the benefit of hindsight, the technical training would have been more satisfying for all if the cultural differences had been acknowledged by all and means of accommodating the differences were agreed to in a manner which gave reasonable assurance of compliance.

With the foregoing in mind, there is much to be gained by acknowledging and respecting the presence of diverse cultures in the delivery of VET (not overlooking similarities with higher education) and acting to strengthen the coupling of these cultures. This coupling is of an entwining nature in that, by purposeful action, aspects of the cultural strengths can be an enriching enclosure of the VET learning core – i.e. making the learning immediately relevant to the learner and valued by employers.

In some instances the nature of the interaction between cultures can be as a clashing causing disruption of the learning and breakdown in partnership between those who would be otherwise cooperatively engaged. For example, a VET teacher recounting an on-going class disruption caused by two students from different cultures (one Asian and the other European) being in open conflict and seemingly ethnically

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\(^8\) In some instances an Australian VET student will be already employed in the workplace in which they are applying the outcomes of their learning. Accordingly, the opportunity exists to directly address the specifics of a particular workplace. Where a student is not yet in the workplace in which the learning outcome will be applied, it is the generality of such workplace cultures which are of interest. A special case exists where the learner is on temporary student placement – in this instance there is a probability of a close association between the provider and the host organisation.
based. As another example, one of the authors had oversight of learning of an Indigenous team in respect of community infrastructure upgrading and maintaining, in a remote location, where some part of the on-the-job learning experience was culturally sympathetically facilitated by one contractor and autocratically (without regard to culture) facilitated by another – leading to high tension within the community and diminishing of learning outcomes. In this latter example, the clash of cultures included discontinuity between two learning environments within the one workplace

**The case for coupling the pursuit of entwined cultures with the goal of graduating capably competent students.**

This, entwining of cultures, reflective review of past research and experience is coupled to the authors’ advocating that graduating *capably competent* learners should be the goal of VET in Australia (Hughes & Cairns 2009). This is a step beyond demonstrating competence in familiar circumstances which is observed at the moment of assessment for qualification awarding purposes. Whilst we would prefer that the Australian VET system overtly embraces the wider notion of “capability”, the nomenclature of competency based training is so firmly entrenched that the use of “capably competent” is a device (employed by us) which is sympathetic to the system – not confronting and not seeking to overturn the Australian VET institutional language. It is from this position that we focus upon the capability attribute, of an individual, and an organisation, having respect for and being responsive to social context and values as identified by Cairns & Stephenson (2009, p. 10).

In the early capability writings of John Stephenson (1990), his use of “values” was directed at the person valuing their actions. In partnership with Len Cairns, this has now evolved to “… the values element [of capability] refers to the way individuals’ actions within uncertainty are guided by a personal set of values and their ability to articulate any values issues associated with that action.” (Cairns & Stephenson 2009, p.17). Although this evolved view of capability is expressed in “individual” terms, it can be extrapolated to organisations; and, in both instances, the matter of values resonates with culture as values and are intimately connected to and rooted within culture.

As “values” are connected to “culture”, so too are they connected to organisation achievement through making the most of what people know and can do. The research which gave rise to the LCM Model (Hughes 2007) – connecting organisational achievement to valuing the outcomes from lifelong learning (L), with valuing a workplace and learning culture which nurtures valuing of learning (C), and valuing the motivations (M) which drive these – made explicit the importance of a learning culture as applies to the activity of learning and drawing upon the outcomes of learning. The LCM Model application to graduating capably competent VET students is reviewed in Hughes and Cairns (2009, pp. 10-13) which can be accessed via the VETNET ECER 2009 proceedings – [http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/abstract/ecer09.htm](http://www.b.shuttle.de/wifo/abstract/ecer09.htm) – viewed 14th July 2010.

**A new insight –**

The LCM Model arose through ethnographic research and the data being viewed through the prism of activity theory. In this process sharing of views (which were culturally entwining rich) between research respondents was shaped by attention to the Johari Window (Pifieffer & Jones 1974) – self-disclosure and feedback from others. Having now revisited this approach and outcomes, there is an appearance that the respondents were engaged in a process which was akin to coupling action learning with narrative research. In respect of narrative research, the Bond and Mifsud (2006, p. 239) cautioning against assuming that what worked in one culture can be readily transferred to the other is very pertinent to our advocating that there be continuing entwining of cultures dialogue throughout the period of learning.

The new insight is that the entwining of cultures purposeful conversation has the potential to cultivate the quality of a narrative researcher / active learner within all the actors engaged in the conversation. This is a topic of on-going consideration by the authors as they contribute to promoting a VET objective of graduating capably competent VET learners and strengthening the association between the VET provider and the workplace as the place of VET learning.
Taking action

The proposition of this paper is that VET outcomes will be strengthened through entwining the cultures of the learner, the learning environment (noting the possibility that the workplace may become formally accepted as part of the learning environment in Australia) and the workplace to which the outcomes of the learning are to be applied. The device of cultural entwining purposeful conversation is the suggested medium - the tool/artifact in Figure 3 (page 7) and with the page 8 characteristics.

With the foregoing in mind, the actual nature of the conversation – form, when and where – will be suited to the circumstances. However, Figure 5 is offered as illustrating a framework for the conversation which has merit given the AQTF Australian VET Institutional mandated requirement of continuous improvement.

With the VET teacher as the lead actor in conversation with the learners, and cognisant of the characteristics of a purposeful conversation (page 8), the following questions are suggested as helpful in framing the on-going conversation throughout the period of the learning –

- What is the nature of the culture of the learning environment? (Noting that there may be more than one)
- How as learners can you best take from and contribute to the learning?
- What is the nature of the workplace environment to which you expect to apply the outcomes of your learning?

In seeking responses to these questions, it is suggested as advisable that the VET teacher is alert to the possibility that some actors in the conversation may be reluctant to express an opinion. Accordingly, an approach of respecting this reluctance, allowing actors to listen and reflect, and then join the conversation at a time and in a manner of their choosing is recommended.

A concluding comment – The Purposeful Conversation and its support for Boundary Crossing

The purposeful conversation as described in this paper is suggested as a useful tool to be employed throughout the period of learning – and possibly beyond where there are continuing relationships. The rationale for this is that on-going conversation between the actors in the learning activity, regarding their respective expectations and values and serving as a forum for integration of their respective activity systems, is a vehicle by which strengthening of learning outcomes can be achieved. Importantly there is gain in nurturing a habit of learning together akin to action learning. Doing this in a manner which

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10 Whilst much of this paper is relevant to higher education, the VET orientation arises because the learning is arguably more immediately aligned to “the workplace” than is the case for higher education. The authors acknowledge that this is a problematic statement, but, for the moment, VET is more so in mind than higher education.
facilitates confident application of knowledge and skill in varying cultural (broadly defined) contexts has the prospect of being an embedded asset for all in the learning partnership.

In this paper, the notion of graduating a “capably competent” learner has been very much in mind and has resonance with the Tuomi-Gronn et al. (2003, p. 4) - “Crossing boundaries involves encountering difference, entering into territory in which we are unfamiliar and, to some extent therefore unqualified”. However, for us, we hold that the purposeful conversation makes boundary crossing central to the learning as discussing the cultural contexts (as we define them) throughout the learning is a device for explicitly embedding the vagaries of dimensions of competency and employability skills within the learning – the boundary is reduced in width and depth when faced by a capably competent VET graduate.

In conclusion -

Facilitating learning for students who are from a range of different nations and attendant cultural influences, belief systems and values has the potential for a clash of student and learning environment cultures over such matters as expectations of the student/teacher relationship. This paper has taken a wider view. In vocational education and training (VET), and similarly in higher education, a teacher is likely to find that students bring diverse cultural orientations to the learning; and not necessarily substantially national or ethnic in origin. For example, a young adult may be significantly influenced by the “youth culture” which has shaped their view and response to learning; and, similarly, a mature adult may have been institutionalised in a manner which causes them to bring beliefs and behaviour to the learning which is significantly different from others in their learning group. Also, religious upbringing, socio-economic background, and generation pre-dispositions are further examples of possible cultural difference which may present in a VET learning group. At this point, we stress that cultural influences - depending upon the observer’s own perspective – can be across the advantaging to disadvantaging spectrum and value judgments can be flawed.

In the case of VET learning, there is an immediate coupling of the learner’s culture with that of the provider TAFE Institute or other registered training organisation (RTO). There is also a coupling with workplace cultures which may be of an immediate nature where the learner is a part-time student and/or already employed and progressively applying the outcomes from their learning to the workplace. In other situations, the learner may be experiencing very significant learning through the workplace and the activities s/he is engaged with at work. In the case of a learner who is not already employed in an associated workplace, the coupling with a workplace culture is in the future; however the generality of what is to be typically encountered is relevant to the learning. Student placements are a special case – albeit not common in Australian delivery of VET – where there is a direct relationship between learner, provider and workplace. The complexity of these intertwined cultural influences and the necessity for the VET learner to apply knowledge and skill in ways relevant to each of the (sometimes competing) cultural expectations across varied “places” is what we are suggesting as a key element for being “capable competent”.

Whilst the examples given in this paper have arisen from the research and learning examinations of Australian contexts and students, we are arguing that in any multi-cultural society (in the broadest sense of that term, not just nationality based cultural diversity), the entwining idea embedded in the paper’s argument is applicable. As nations, and other groupings, become more diverse in the internal composition of their cultural patterns, values and history, these elements become more significant in the educational provision of VET.

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11 In Australia, VET is delivered by a range of what are identified as public and private registered training organisations (RTOs). TAFE Institutes are publicly funded RTOs and are akin to the UK polytechnics of the past.
Non-Reducing the management load through deeper knowing of what volunteers know and can do


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