

Achieving inclusive adult education and training practice Dr Kaye Bowman

This occasional paper is based on an opening keynote presented at the 2007 Inclusive e-Learning National Showcase in Melbourne on 4 December 2007 as part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework and is being published as an occasional paper by ALA.

The powerpoint presentation is available from www.flexiblelearning.net.au or www.kayebowman@bigpond.com.

Recently, I incorporated the findings of recent research reports into a useable client engagement operational framework which would display inclusive adult education and training practice.

Initially I discussed the concept – ‘Inclusive adult education and training practice’. The term “inclusive” is often used to reflect the desire of achieving an individual-client-centred approach to adult education and training

I used an environmental ecosystem as a metaphor for the ecosystem perspective as this encourages thinking providers to think about their role in the larger education and training system and the wider local community.

The ecosystem concept focuses on the functioning of interdependent groupings of things reliant on each other. One example of this is that in a pond if one process is faulty the entire ecosystem (both above and below the pond) suffers, until the necessary ecological adjustments are made.

In an operational framework for inclusive adult learning practice I suggest seven interdependent grouping of labels or “dimensions” be included. These seven dimensions are generic forms of the findings of Miller (2005) and variously focus on the emotional, social, educational, technical, managerial, stakeholder relations and financial aspects of client engagement in learning

The term “inclusive” has become popular to reflect the desired, individual client-centred approach to adult education and training, as previously stated.

“Diversity management” is another popular term, currently preferred to the traditional term of equity.

The equity group approach has its strengths, and its limitations. It assumes uniformity within the group although often this is not the case. People with a disability for example are clearly not a uniform group. Different types of disability-visual, hearing, physical and intellectual - will all affect the type of learning support required.

To manage client diversity is to be capable of responding to everyone’s and any one adult’s learning needs. It is to be inclusive. However, we need to be sure that the diversity management or inclusive approach does not take away from the idea of

disadvantage. Those people who most need to be included are those people who most require extra support because they are often so disadvantaged in relation to learning.

By inclusive practice I mean, as one TAFE teacher put to researchers Figgis et al (2007)

It's when the people who need to be included don't notice it. Whatever way you do it.

Taking an ecological perspective is useful in identifying all of the key interdependent factors that must be considered if individuals are to be successfully engaged in adult education and training. It is not a new perspective to view the adult vocational education and training sector. A Skills Ecosystem demonstration project was nationally funded and managed by New South Wales. It is my understanding that this has informed the Australian Government's Regional Skills Shortages Strategies program.

The Skills Ecosystem project aimed to move participants beyond traditional narrow training supply approaches. Participants were encouraged to develop desirable "skills" or "workforce" ecosystems by looking at the relationships between business performance and skills, knowledge and ways of working and positioning training interventions alongside interventions in employment relations, the design and organisation of work (Windsor, 2006 and Buchanan, 2006).

I also gained inspiration from Figgis et al (2007) who found and used the metaphorical use of the language of ecology a practical tool to stimulate insightful thinking among TAFE personnel as to the factors that aid successful equity initiatives, and effectively join bottom up with top down organisational initiatives.

It seemed novel to apply the ecological perspective to the individual client so I integrated the seven interrelated factors or dimensions that would need to be considered and ticked off in relation to every learner.

It did seem that if all seven dimensions were not covered, you would be less likely to achieve good outcomes, particularly for those who required extra support because they were already disadvantaged in relation to learning.

In relation to the seven dimensions, Miller undertook a systematic review of all research available on Indigenous Australians in adult education. It was a highly scientific exercise and out of it were identified the major recurring seven factors. From these, Miller concluded education and training programs for Indigenous Australians must be 'centred' to be effective.

Miller's identifies seven factors which I have labeled with generic, monosyllabic and hopefully terms to make them memorable. They are:

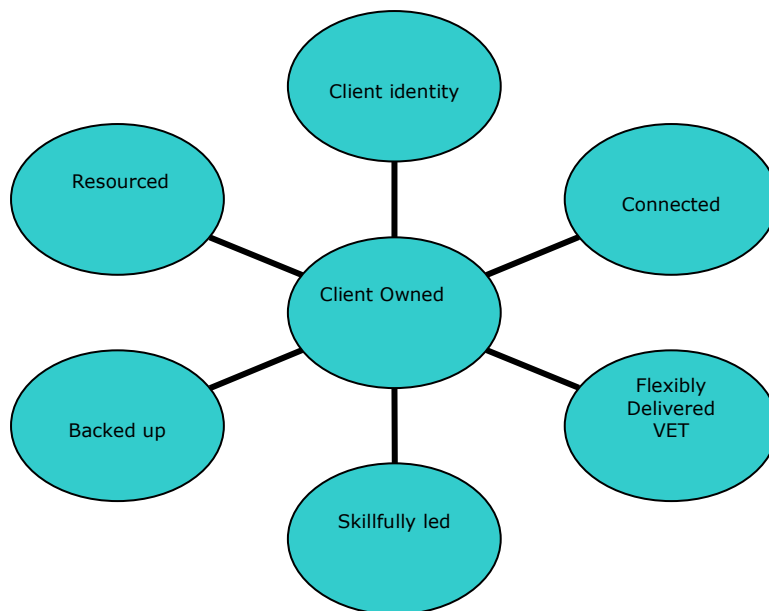
- Community involvement and ownership - CLIENT OWNED
- Indigenous identities, cultures, knowledge and values – CLIENT IDENTITY
- Working in true partnerships - CONNECTED
- Flexibility in program design, content - ADAPTABLE

- Quality staff and committed advocacy - SKILFULLY LED
- Extensive student support services - BACKED-UP
- Appropriate funding that allows for sustainability - RESOURCED

The seven factors have been tested and found workable, both as a framework for reporting all other Indigenous VET research (see O’Callaghan, 2005) and as an evaluation framework for specific projects. The Ithaca Group (Professor Rod McDonald et al) tested them to evaluate a pilot Indigenous VET - learning engagement program and found them valuable.

Examination of other “equity in education ” research shows the same or very similar success identifiers are often in evidence, perhaps with different labels, but which are essentially the same on further examination.

A client engagement operational framework to achieve inclusive adult education and training practice



What follows is a brief overview of each element.

1. Client-owned

The central factor in achieving positive learning outcomes is that the learning is client owned. The individual client must be engaged and involved in the learning process.

Forcing adults to learn rarely, if ever, works. Adults need to be motivated; their learning must be in accord with their aspirations and needs. Learning must be relevant with benefits that are clear.

This may mean that some learners must first be (re)-engaged in informal learning. It may be advisable to respond to the learner’s first articulated need. A request such as “I want to learn the email to keep in touch with family”- before encouraging the undertaking of more structured learning, be it either of a non formal unaccredited nature or an accredited, formal learning with qualifications related outcomes.

2. Client identity

Miller, 2004 found that the aspirations and personal outcomes of adult Indigenous Australians are most critical in their approach to education and training.

She mentions enhanced self-confidence and self-esteem, improved communication skills and feelings of being respected by others within the community as being important to students. She refers to these outcomes as the enabling factors that allow individuals to achieve even more, and other positive, outcomes.

Psycho-social outcomes - confidence, self-esteem, and the aspiration to engage in learning – are also seen as necessary stepping stones towards confident participation in adult learning. This common and recurring theme is also seen in wider “equity in education” research literature (Bowman, 2007).

This does not mean that more, and higher, levels of learning do not further develop an adult’s concept of self. It is to say that the building of (self) identity capital is a critical milestone outcome for those in the process of re-engaging with learning.

To build identity capital the client needs learning programs and environments that reflect their cultures and values. To give a few, albeit simplistic, examples:

- Indigenous Australians value “both ways” learning, ie cross cultural approaches.
- People with a Disability value a positive cap-ability/can-do ability approach.
- Older people have rich life and work experiences which they want acknowledged and built on in a learning program.
- Younger adults, as digital natives, would need to be taken into account.

It must be remembered that some adults may require several years of ‘study’ to develop positive attitudes about themselves as learners or move up the learning continuum. It may be a slow process to move from being engaged in learning and achieving self identity capital building (or the ‘soft’, psychosocial outcomes and related generic skills) to undertaking more directed learning for work and/or community outcomes purposes, and thus achieving positive health and wellbeing outcomes (Bowman, 2007).

3. Connected

Strong connections between training providers and community, industry and government organizations remain a critical aspect in achieving successful client engagement in learning and sustainable outcomes that are beyond the life of the initial learning program.

Developing partnerships with stakeholders is one way of making contact with specific client markets and ensuring education delivery programs are provided in the most

effective and appropriate way for all involved parties. Partnerships often are transforming. They produce 'hybrids' with neither side operating as it had previously.

"True" partnerships are based on respect and trust, agreed goals and collective action.

One interesting finding (Figgis et al, 2007) is that community-initiated equity developments stimulated more changes within TAFE institutes than did government pilot programs.

It is also interesting that relationships ecosystem mapping of organisation connections in the community is a useful exercise (Golding, 2002).

4. Adaptable

Flexible course design, content and delivery are required as a central focus for adult learning providers. Many positive changes have been occurring in this area.

The use of e-learning as a part of this is a more recent phenomenon. It would appear that is not yet fully embedded into practice but it is clear that technology is enabling more flexible, personal and social learning. New technologies are enabling learning 'anywhere/anytime' to be a realistic objective while, through technology, more individualised approaches to learning are being progressed.

Equally the social connection opportunities technology affords allows for learner learning circles to be formed – on line "in person" hence peer learning enhances the generation of new knowledge, and learning outcomes.

5. Skilfully led

There is clear evidence that program effectiveness is directly affected by the commitment, expertise, understanding and sensitivity of teachers, tutors, support staff and administrators.

Five common ingredients of successful learning practitioners have been identified and discussed by the Ithaca group (2005). They are knowledgeable, adaptive, connected, supportive and tenacious.

Management is an issue. Managers need to support the efforts of their frontline teachers. The 'client focused, equity inclusive' approach needs to permeate the entire organisations to ensure enduring success (Figgis et al, 2007).

6. Backed up

Appropriate support services must be in place to support the learner's progression, completion and achievement of desired post-completion outcomes. This is particularly

important in relation to disadvantaged learners as it is here that extra effort will most often be required.

Three types of support need to be present:

- Educational support – research concludes that educational support services, such as tutoring and literacy support, are essential for ‘at risk’ learners to start and stay in training with positive outcomes. Hence a ‘practitioner team’ approach might be required.
- Personal support - students need access to social and cultural support or pastoral care. Partnerships with various human services organisations can provide this access.
- Economic support - students need financial support to enable the undertaking of a learning program. They benefit from employment advocacy services and connections with employment agencies and individual enterprises if they are to achieve desirable job outcomes.

Many learners have these factors “covered” as part of their life circumstances but, for equity clients in particular, these supports are often missing and so need to be incorporated as part of the learning experience through partnering with the required service agencies. Here too individuals must become adept at boundary-crossing - connecting with many groups within and beyond the education training enterprise. One example of where this works is the National Disability Coordination Officers Programme which connect adults into education and training, and provides social and economic support services through developing true partnerships.

7. Resourced

More than seed funding is needed to achieve inclusiveness although to date this has been the most common approach to involving those who are disadvantaged in learning yet many equity programs remain at this stage. They fail to thrive, indeed grow, because current funding methods place too much emphasis on starting initiatives and little, or none, on developing and scaling-up those that show promise.

Funding mechanisms must be reexamined to stimulate innovative equity practice (Figgis et al 2007).

One commonly raised issue is the lack of adequate funds to fully support disadvantaged learners although it appears some positive weighting of funding formulas in relation to equity clients is now more common.

In conclusion, the ecological model is an appropriate comparison with adult learning organisations as the latter must be strategic partners in all aspects of local social and economic development.

An effective adult learning ecosystem is one in which the learning matches each individual's interests, strengths and needs. The learning must contain the right level of challenge, be provided flexibly and exhibit the necessary support and encouragement determined by socio-economic circumstances.

An effective adult learning ecosystem involves a collaborative partnership model with the wider community.

Hopefully this model is a practical step forward in assisting adult educators to work effectively with all clients. I would like to think I have left you with a practical tool, a useable client engagement operational framework, to achieve inclusive adult education and training practice.

There does remain a need for more Australians to realise their potential by entering the workforce, enhancing their work skills and/or staying engaged with the workforce.

Just remember: ecosystems are organic, they change over time. Even badly damaged or destroyed ones can be restored; equally, new ones may be created instead.

References

- Bowman, K, 2007, *Recognising the diversity of adult learners in performance measurement* Paper 4, 'Engagement and participation in a learner centred system', Adult Learning Australia, Canberra
- Buchanan, J, 2006, *From Skills Shortages to Decent Work*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney
- Figgis, J, Butorac, A, Clayton, B, Meyers D, Dickie M, Malley J, McDonald R, 2007, *Advancing equity: Merging 'bottom up' initiatives with 'top down' strategies*, NCVER Adelaide.
- Golding, B, 2002, 'Network mapping', workshop paper to Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association Conference, Melbourne, 20 March
- Ithaca Group, 2005, *Not exactly rocket science: Replicating good practice in meeting diverse client needs*, ANTA, Brisbane.
- Miller, C, 2004, *Aspects of training that meet Indigenous Australians' aspirations—a systematic review of research*, NCVER, Adelaide
- O'Callaghan, K, 2005, *Indigenous VET at a glance*, NCVER, Adelaide
- Volkoff, V, Clarke, K & Walstab, A, 2007, *The Impact of TAFE Inclusiveness Strategies*, NCVER, Adelaide
- Windsor, K, 2006, *A Mid-term Evaluation of the Skill Ecosystem Demonstration Project*, NSW Department of Education and Training, Sydney