

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 454 449

CE 081 969

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TITLE Work Based Learning and Vocational Education and Training Practitioners. Working Paper.
INSTITUTION Technology Univ.-Sydney, Broadway (Australia). Research Centre for Vocational Education and Training.
SPONS AGENCY Australian National Training Authority, Melbourne.
REPORT NO RCVET-WP-99.03
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 13p.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text:
<http://www.uts.edu.au/fac/edu/rcvet/working%20papers/9903Chappell.pdf>.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Developed Nations; Discourse Communities; *Educational Change; Educational Principles; Foreign Countries; Job Skills; *Job Training; Labor Force Development; Partnerships in Education; *Postsecondary Education; *Teacher Role; Theory Practice Relationship; Trainers; *Vocational Education; *Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS Australia; *Work Based Learning

ABSTRACT

Work-based learning (WBL) is one response of education and training institutions to criticisms they have failed to adapt to changing economic times and the changing nature of work. Formal educational institutions are challenged by the perception that they are inadequate to the task of preparing the present and future work force with the necessary knowledge, skills, and dispositions required in post-industrial workplaces; discourses focusing on learning that occurs outside formal educational institutions; and discourses problematizing what counts as knowledge in contemporary society. Potential impact of WBL can be explored by focusing on technical and further education (TAFE) in Australia. TAFE should be a natural home for WBL because it claims an explicit and direct connection with the world of work, but its teachers face an intensifying dilemma in their educational practices, due to their location in an educational institution rather than the workplace and by curriculum practices grounded by notions of content stability, compartmentalization, occupational continuity, and universally applicable outcomes. Differences that distinguish WBL from current vocational education and training (VET) practices relate to the individualization of the learning program and to the multiple sets of relationships that are created between the participating organization, learners, provider, and VET practitioner. (Contains 34 references.) (YLB)

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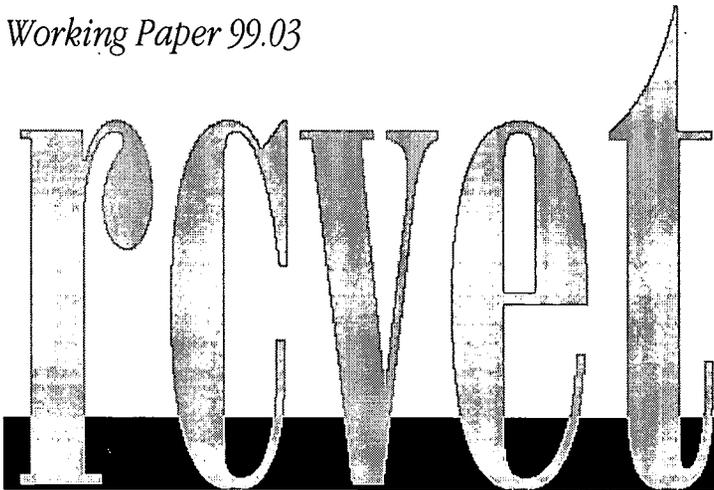
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BACKGROUND

The expression Work Based Learning(WBL) has come to the fore in the discourses of education and training in recent times. The reasons for this are complex involving, amongst other things, the recognition that vocationally focused education and training programs have been the subject of considerable critique for well over a decade. WBL can be seen as one response of education and training institutions to criticisms that suggest these institutions have, for the most part, failed to adapt to changing economic times and in particular the changing nature of work that characterises these new times.

However having said this, the meaning of WBL is as yet ill-defined; interpreted differently in different education and training sites. For some in the educational community WBL merely legitimates existing pedagogical practices in work related learning while others see it as a radical re-conceptualisation of learning and work. In this discussion paper I outline the reasons why WBL is a topic of interest in educational institutions concerned with work related learning and go on to describe the different conceptions that appear to be ascribed to WBL. Finally, I suggest what impact these different conceptions have on the work of vocational education and training practitioners in Technical and Further Education (TAFE).

NEW WORK - NEW EDUCATION

A persistent feature of contemporary discourses that speak of new economic times is that, in one way or another, educational institutions, as currently constituted, are seen as inadequate to the task of preparing the present and future workforce with the necessary knowledge, skills and dispositions required in post-industrial workplaces. These discourses, labelled the 'new vocationalism' in education (Ball 1994, Pollard, Purvis & Walford 1988) argue that modern education and training institutions have failed to adapt to changing economic times. Grubb (1996:1-23), for example, traces the emergence of this phenomenon, in the United States, to the publication of the government report *A Nation at Risk*. He argues that the rationale for this development involved discourses that contained 'insistent economic rhetoric' concerning 'the threat to our country's future' and the 'rising tide of mediocrity in the schools, causing a decline in competitiveness with the Japanese, the South Koreans and the Germans' (ibid 1996:2).

Similarly, reports in Australia have also played heavily on the importance of education and training in meeting the new economic needs of industry and business. The Australian Education Council Review Committee (1991:6) for example, has argued that the 'separate approach to general and vocational education in this country (Australia) has in some ways hindered the development and implementation of more creative and relevant educational responses to the rapid changes in the nature of work and the skill requirements of individuals as workers and active participants in modern society.'

For well over a decade industry and business have called for educational institutions to focus much more on learning for work, career guidance and vocational skill development than on the traditional academic curriculum (Business Council of Australia, 1986:10-17 Australian Industry Group, 1999). At the same time governments have encouraged business and industry to become more involved in the development, implementation and accreditation of vocational curricula.

A second and related challenge to formal educational institutions, involved in learning for work, is found in discourses that focus on learning that occurs outside of formal educational institutions. The discourses of 'Learning in the workplace' (Marsick & Watkins (1990), 'learning organisations' (Senge (ed.) 1994), 'Work-based learning' (Boud 1997) and 'informal learning' (Garrick 1998) have a central place within contemporary literatures concerning the development of knowledge and skills in post-industrial societies. These discourses promote vocational learning outside of educational institutions as crucial sites for learning and justify this by drawing on a number of learning theories that posit experience as central to learning. Marsick and Watkins (1990:8), for example use the work of Dewey to suggest that the workplace is an excellent site for learning because 'learning takes place through an ongoing dialectical process of action and reflection'. Other commentators highlight the 'authenticity' of the workplace as a learning setting, arguing that authenticity not only privileges the workplace as a rich site for learning (Stevenson, 1994) but also provides a purposeful social and cultural context for learning (Pea, 1987).

These commentaries suggest that all educational institutions should incorporate the learning that occurs at work within their educational programs. New partnerships between educational institutions and industries are promoted. New curriculum designs, assessment practices and recognition of prior learning procedures that incorporate workplace experience are developed and the assumptions and propositions embedded within adult learning theory are incorporated into the new discourses of workplace learning.

The concepts of 'empowerment' (Mezirow 1990) and 'self-direction' (Knowles 1980) are seen as ways to develop worker 'autonomy' and 'independent decision making'. The ideas of 'critical thinking' and 'reflection' (Brookfield 1991) are re-interpreted as techniques that can be used to construct dispositions of 'flexibility', 'innovation' and 'adaptability' in the post-industrial worker and the concept of 'lifelong learning' (Candy 1991) is reconfigured in contemporary organisational discourses that speak of 'continuous improvement' and 'commitment'.

One outcome of these discourses is that the workplace, rather than the educational institution, has been positioned as the most authentic site of learning for work. The work sites of post-industrial economies now compete with the educational institutions of the State as the privileged sites of learning (Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996:6). Furthermore, in

much of post-compulsory education, employment rather than education becomes the gateway (and barrier) to learning opportunities, personal development, career progression and educational credentialling.

A third and arguably more disruptive challenge to the institutions of modern education is found in discourses that problematise what counts as knowledge in contemporary society. These discourses, while emphasising the crucial role of knowledge in new times (Castells 1993:15-21), at the same time, question the adequacy and utility of both the content and organisation of the traditional forms of 'academic knowledge' that have been central to the formation of modern educational institutions.

These discourses suggest that knowledge should not be judged in terms of any claims to certainty or 'truth'. Nor do they judge knowledge on its claims to contributing to human progress. Rather these discourses judge knowledge in terms of its utility in maximising the 'efficiency' and 'effectiveness' of social and economic systems; an example of what Lyotard (1984) has called 'performativity'. In these discourses knowledge becomes another circulating commodity in a globalising capitalist market (Marginson 1994, Kenway 1993).

Traditional conceptions of knowledge that have sustained and legitimised the institutional identities of modern education, are now characterised as dated and inadequate in terms of content, organisation and exchange value. As Senge (1994:283) puts it, when discussing the knowledge requirements of post-industrial organisations:

The 'compartmentalisation of knowledge' creates a false sense of confidence. For example, the traditional disciplines that influence management - such disciplines as economics, accounting, marketing and psychology divide the world into neat subdivisions within which one can often say, 'This is the problem and here is the solution'. But the boundaries that make the subdivisions are fundamentally arbitrary as any manager finds out who attempts to treat an important problem as if it is purely 'an economic problem' or 'an accounting problem'.

Educational institutions have responded to these contemporary challenges in a number of ways. The policies and discourses of new vocationalism have resulted in more vocationally oriented curricula being developed for schools, colleges and universities. At the same time, work experience programs are common features of school, TAFE and university courses. Various collaborative links have been forged between educational institutions and business and industry. New interdisciplinary courses and awards that cross traditional disciplinary areas have also been developed; all of these changes, at least in part, being instigated by the recognition of the changing nature of work in new times.

In the context of this discussion paper WBL can be seen as yet another response, by education and training institutions, to the changing nature of work. However, to date, no clear meaning has emerged in relation to WBL in these educational institutions. Indeed, the term takes on different meanings in different vocational education and training sites and in different occupationally focused courses. In the following section, the potential impact of WBL on one such educational site is explored by focusing on Technical and Further Education (TAFE) in Australia.

TAFE AND LEARNING FOR WORK

In many ways, the institution of TAFE should be one of the natural homes for WBL. It is after all the educational institution that has always laid claim to an explicit and direct connection with the world of work. Indeed, governments originally constituted the institution, as a public system responsible for supplying business and industry with a suitably skilled workforce. This particular institutional characteristic has been adopted with some pride by TAFE, using it to mark the institution as different from the institutions of school and university education. TAFE demands, for example, that employed teachers must have industrial experience prior to employment in the institution and TAFE teachers themselves, construct their occupational identity as much in terms of their industrial expertise as their educational expertise (Chappell 1999).

Over the last decade the policy discourses of new vocationalism, including competency standards development, flexible delivery, recognition of prior learning processes, workplace assessment strategies, new learning technologies and the more recent arrival of training packages, have transformed the curriculum and pedagogical practices of TAFE and its teachers. Not surprisingly, many TAFE teachers consider that these initiatives represent a radical change in the way they conceptualise and undertake their work. New curriculum designs, assessment methods, recognition of prior learning processes and the establishment of national curricula and training packages are seen as not only making new demands but altering teachers' conceptions of their role within the educational process.

In some senses these changes can be interpreted as advancing the concept of WBL in TAFE. Industry developed competency standards insert workplace relevance into VET curricula. RPL processes legitimise learning at work. The workplace has become a crucial assessment site and flexible delivery methods are seen as best meeting the needs of learners at work.

A recently completed study (Chappell 1999) that investigated TAFE teachers' views on these changes found that, for the most part, teachers saw these reforms as congruent with their existing views on learning for work. Teachers spoke consistently of 'knowledge of industry', 'workplace knowledge', 'technical competence', 'knowledge relevant to industry' and the 'practical experience' of work as important characteristics of their practice. As one teacher commented 'The main thing I bring to my teaching is my experience as a practitioner; that is the main asset that I see TAFE has. They have experienced practitioners as teachers.'

The focus on outcomes and work-based skills in new vocationalism is also congruent with TAFE teachers' views about learning for work. Making learning 'relevant to industry' and the 'real world' of work, 'working collaboratively with industry' and 'working in industry settings', providing students with 'workplace skills' are all expressions that teachers used when speaking of their work in TAFE. Furthermore, they are also consistent with the rhetorics of WBL.

However, the talk of teachers also reveals that their claim to industrial expertise is somewhat problematic. Commonly, TAFE teachers indicate that they need to 'keep up-to-date with industry', and maintain 'industrial experience' particularly in a period of rapid workplace change. Teachers' interest in this area is directed not so much to issues to do with the quality and relevance of their courses but rather to maintaining credibility with students: 'I'm really scared that I will lose the relevance and currency of my practical experience. I'm just really scared about my credibility with the students; you know five years down the track and I haven't seen a client for five years.'

It seems that TAFE teachers see their legitimacy as teachers, particularly in the eyes of students, as being tied to their industrial expertise. The emergence of both new vocationalism and the discourses of workplace learning have meant that many teachers now appear more anxious about the level of their workplace expertise. A number of teachers commented that they 'feel threatened' by having closer links with industry because they 'will not succeed' in meeting the demands of the industrial sector and thus lose their professional credibility.

These comments suggest that TAFE teachers use their industrial experience to construct a sense of who they are in the educational project. Moreover, they see this industrial knowledge and experience as conferring legitimacy on their professional identity as teachers. The discourse of 'industrial expertise' appears to be doing similar discursive work for TAFE teachers as 'disciplinary' knowledge does for teachers working in schools. The geography teacher in the school and the hospitality teacher in the TAFE college achieve an educational identity through their 'mastery' of particular albeit different bodies of knowledge.

This similarity is, however, only a partial one. In the world of TAFE the ability of teachers to 'keep up-to-date' is given additional importance because many TAFE students are not only learners but are, at the same time, workers. Thus they are able to make an immediate and on-going evaluation of the industrial expertise of the TAFE teacher. The utility and currency of the vocational knowledge and skills that TAFE teachers share with their students can be tested immediately by students in their working lives. It is in this sense 'practical' knowledge and is judged not in terms of its claims to generalisable 'truth' as in the case of discipline-based subjects but rather its performativity in the workplace.

Consequently, a TAFE teacher's credibility as 'industry expert' is always open to question and complicated by the rapid changes to work that currently characterises post-industrial workplaces. The teacher's credibility is also further compounded by her location in an educational institution rather than a workplace. It seems that location in an educational institution not the workplace is a point of considerable tension for teachers in TAFE.

Furthermore, this educational location is a site characterised by different discourses and sense making constructions than those of the workplace. Historically, TAFE, as an educational institution, has compartmentalised vocational knowledge and skills in particular ways. It has used curriculum models borrowed from other educational sites to categorise and fragment the components of vocational competence. Traditionally, it has also held a standardised view of occupational competence, offering all participants,

irrespective of their particular location at work, the same or similar programs of study. It has therefore, assumed that occupations maintain a degree of stability and continuity in terms of the work practices exercised in workplaces. Consequently, the institution faces considerable difficulties in adapting its programs to the new work order (Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1994), that is characterised by continuous change, novel combinations of work-related knowledges and skills and site specific, contingent work practices.

TAFE teachers therefore face an intensifying dilemma in their educational practices. A dilemma brought on firstly by their location in an educational institution rather than the workplace and secondly by curriculum practices grounded by notions of content stability, compartmentalisation, occupational continuity and universally applicable outcomes.

WHAT IS WORK BASED LEARNING?

An argument can be made that Work Based Learning is a concept very familiar to the institution of TAFE. The majority of its courses focus on workplace practice and use the workplace as both a site of learning and as a learning resource. Work placements, on-site courses, TAFE workshops, industry and business partnerships and workplace visits, are common features found in many TAFE courses. Furthermore, many TAFE teachers are not only familiar with pedagogical practices that draw of the theories of experiential and problem based learning, but also employ work based learning contracts, projects, case studies, workplace examples, industrial visits, simulations, role-plays and work experience in order to connect learning with the 'real' world of work. Indeed, one would be hard pressed to find a TAFE teacher who would not claim that they were involved in one way or another in work based learning.

However a counter argument can be made that the curriculum and pedagogical practices that characterise TAFE, though in themselves educational sound, in so far as they attempt to integrate vocational theory and practice, fail to acknowledge the realities of the new work in post-industrial workplaces.

Commonly, this new work is characterised, as indeterminate and ephemeral, based on rapidly changing technologies and undertaken by a fragmented global workforce consisting of highly skilled, mobile and functionally flexible workers and lowly skilled, numerically flexible workers subject to periods of unemployment (Hetrick & Boje 1992: 48-58, McNabb & Ryan 1990). Halel characterises the post-industrial workplace in terms of multiple goals, smart growth, strategic management and democratic free enterprise (quoted in Harvey 1990:174). Claims are made that post-industrial work is found increasingly at the sites of consumption rather than the sites of production (Abercrombie 1991:171-85). The extrinsic value placed on the products of work has shifted away from the products themselves into the 'images' of products. The post-industrial society is a society where traditional product differentiation including cost, quality and reliability has become largely indistinguishable. Products become differentiated using other parameters such as image, style and representation. Thus post-industrial enterprises have commodified the images and representations of products and are now more in the business of the production and exchange of cultural forms rather than material products. (Blighton & Turnbull, 1992:236-237, Firat, 1992:79-83).

In summarising the main features of post-industrialism. Castells (1993:15-21) suggests it involves five significant features. The first feature is the application of new science and technology, together with information and management practices in production, distribution, consumption and exchange. It also involves the increasing role of the manipulation of symbols and information processing activities in work organisation and productivity. It involves a shift from mass production to flexible specialisation together with an increased emphasis on innovation and adaptability. A fourth feature is the emergence of a global competitive market in terms of the organisation of production, distribution and consumption and, finally, it requires a high dependency on the creation and application of new knowledge.

Critics of this analysis argue that, on a global scale, most industrial work is now no different in form only different in geographical location. It has merely shifted from older capitalist economies to emerging capitalist economies (Callinicos 1989:133-144). While Touraine (1988) an early critic of the concept insists that the post-industrial society is merely the latest mechanism by which capitalism seeks to maintain its insatiable need to grow and profit. Pixley (1993) and Brass (1995) attack these discourses in terms of their tendency to marginalise the unemployed and their acceptance of the inevitability of large-scale unemployment. While Watkins (1986), in a study of the work organisation adopted in new high-tech industries, finds little evidence to suggest that work is organised in any way other than Fordist production principles. This position has also been confirmed by Hull (in Gee, Hull & Lankshear 1996:105-128) when investigating work organisation in a computer company located in Silicon Valley, California.

However, despite this opposition, the dominant discourses of post-industrialism insist that contemporary workplaces require new kinds of people, with new knowledge, skills and dispositions Champy (1995). The latest report *Training to Compete*, produced by the Australian Industry Group (1999) reinforces this message. In this report the contemporary worker is employed to contribute to the competitiveness, innovation, flexibility and customer orientation of enterprises. The new worker must be multi-skilled capable of working in teams, solving problems and self-management. Today's worker needs to be computer literate and have a willingness and ability to adapt to changing work requirements. On-going learning, by employees, is seen as the vehicle through which these new skills and dispositions can be achieved.

While the report stresses the crucial importance of on-going training in these new times it also signals that the current VET system needs to be improved (AIG:1999:xv). More flexible training options must be offered in a manner that is more relevant and appropriate to specific enterprises. The report stresses the importance of training brokerage activities, which provide enterprises with training options that offer more choices and focus on specific enterprise needs. The report also suggests that in the future 'companies want to work directly with education and training providers, either public or private, as the best way to achieve the results they desire and cut through the complexity of the formal system.'(ibid:1999: xvi)

This suggests that providers such as TAFE must move away from conceptualising vocational curricula as sets of pre-determined and standardised contents suitable for anyone working in a particular occupation. To one that recognises the specific nature of the relationship between the worker-learner and the particular needs of the enterprise.

Some commentators suggest that WBL is a concept that may well set a new direction in curriculum development that can address this shift in emphasis. In this model of Work Based Learning the learning program's point of departure is the work currently undertaken by the worker-learner. The curriculum is developed through negotiations between the worker-learner, the employing organisation and the provider. The results of this negotiation is an individualised learning program that reflects both enterprise and learner specific needs, interests and agreed outcomes; while at the same time meeting the standards that are attached to particular levels of accredited awards.

The negotiations involve developing a learning program, designed around the learning needs of individual workers and the strategic directions of the enterprise. Consequently the program is not based on existing courses or subjects but rather is defined by the work activities of the learner in the enterprise. This does not mean that particular subjects or modules may not be taken. However, it does mean that they must be relevant to achieving the negotiated learning outcomes that are developed. These negotiations also involve the recognition of prior learning of individuals, however once again this recognition is tied to their relevance to the negotiated learning outcomes. The range, complexity and depth of the negotiated learning outcomes are used as benchmarks for determining the level of award gained by the learner on successful completion of the program.

This model of WBL claims a number of advantages. It locates the learning site in the workplace rather than the educational institution. It uses work rather than pre-existing curricula as the basis of the learning program while at the same time linking learning with the strategic aims of the enterprise. It taps into current interest in organisations to enhance their organisational capability at a time of on-going change and uncertainty. It provides learners with transportable qualifications that enhance their future employment choices without requiring them to undertake extended study outside of their current employment and also addresses the perennial problem of the relevance of courses. Unlike traditional programs, the model also extends the idea of flexibility by not setting tight boundaries around the content, level and mix of particular sets of knowledge and skills.

Despite these advantages, this model of WBL is unlikely to be useful for all clients of the VET system. It assumes for example that participants must not only be in work but that the company in which the participant works is both willing and able to provide the support and commitment required to establish and implement a WBL program. Not all enterprises and employers are either willing or able to make such a commitment. People who want qualifications so that they can enter the workforce do not fit the cohort identified by this model of WBL. The model is also geared more to large enterprises than small business and may well meet some resistance from occupational and professional regulatory bodies who determine who can be recognised as competent to practice in a particular vocational area.

Consequently, this particular model of WBL is unlikely to replace existing courses offered by VET providers such as TAFE, but rather should be seen as a possible alternative that particular organisations and enterprises may well consider as meeting their human resource development needs. However, providers such as TAFE who may wish to develop this alternative WBL strategy must consider the capacity of the organisation to deliver this alternative. This particular model of WBL requires quite different sets of skills and capabilities than those that have traditionally defined vocational teachers and trainers.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES WBL FROM CURRENT VET PRACTICES?

There are a number of differences that distinguish this form of WBL from current VET practices. Many of these differences relate to the individualisation of the learning program and to the multiple sets of relationships that are created between the participating organisation, the learners, the provider and the VET practitioner.

In terms of the individualisation of the learning program, WBL involves quite different work:

- Practitioners develop and design individual programs
- They assess unique learning outcomes for each learner
- They assess unique RPL submissions tied to the negotiated learning program
- They negotiate learning support systems in the host organisation.
- They source and negotiate learning support in their own institution
- They judge the level of award based on the negotiated learning outcomes

In terms of relationships VET practitioners involved in WBL:

- Negotiate with relevant and often disparate vocational areas in their institution
- Set up and monitor the contractual relationship between the learner, the host organisation and the institution.
- Are involved with the host organisation in selecting and recruiting participants
- Work with the learners supervisor/mentor in the organisation
- Negotiate with the organisation and the learner in the design and delivery of the program.
- Act as learning brokers in the host organisation

VET practitioners in WBL may also need to understand and resolve the complexities involved in converting work into learning. They may well be required to defend and justify the place of theory in the learning program. They will almost certainly be called on to explain how they maintain 'standards' in these negotiated programs. They will be more involved in the financial negotiations of the program and will be required to locate and in some cases generate the resources that are needed to implement the program. Finally and arguably most importantly they will need to maintain and enhance the relationship that needs to be developed between the host organisation and the VET provider.

A FINAL WORD

While debates rage over government policies that have opened up VET to the competitive pressures of the market, one of the outcomes has been an increased sensitivity on the part of VET providers to the needs of the consumers of vocational education and training. This sensitivity has materialised in numerous ways. One of which has been an increased focus on the skill requirements of contemporary workplaces. At the same time learning has escaped the walls of educational institutions and is now seen as an integral and on-going feature of contemporary work. The potential implications of these developments are only now beginning to emerge in the VET sector. One response, to date, has been to re-conceptualise Work Based Learning as a fruitful strategy that addresses many of the

criticisms that have plagued VET in recent times. It is however no universal panacea to the problems confronting VET. Having said that, WBL does provide some interesting and novel approaches to meeting both the needs of learners and the needs of companies. It takes up the challenges presented by the discourses of new vocationalism, workplace learning and the issue of new knowledge, in the VET sector. While at the same time presenting the sector with a number of new challenges that come with adopting WBL as a viable alternative learning pathway for particular organisations and particular learners.

For TAFE teachers this new approach also presents a number of challenges. Implementation of this model of WBL requires significantly different sets of knowledge and skills. Knowledge and skills that are not derived from TAFE teachers being cast as experts in both curriculum content and teaching practice. But rather to a professional identity that conceptualises the TAFE teacher as a learning broker, involved in negotiating and developing learning programs that meet both the needs of the worker-learner and the employing company.

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Title: <i>Work based learning & Vocational education - Training practitioners (WP 99-03)</i>	
Author(s): <i>Clive Chappell</i>	
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