

Australian *Flexible Learning* Framework

Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

Disengaged and denied, or supported and skilled – the journey to a learner-centred model for rural and remote older learners

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Executive summary

Introduction

This research project is one of six funded nationally by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) through a series of initiatives within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework). It seeks to analyse issues relevant to supporting the implementation of flexible learning as it aligns with the HLT50402 Diploma of Paramedic Science (Ambulance) Training Package introduction.

That introduction enables recognition of learning at work, learning in different ways and learning in different modes. It attempts to put the learner at the centre of the learning process and does not focus wholly on delivery. The accent has moved to outcomes measured by performance with the critical assessment being workplace-based. Within this flexible learner context, learners are able to access learning materials at times and places that suit their life or their work. One of the options that is becoming increasingly popular is that of technology-based offerings where there is a wide range of options.

A selection of several types of offerings is known as blended learning. However, the range needs to include options that suit the learner's stage of development, situation and interest.

The project

This action research project was conducted within the Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) between June and October 2004. Its purpose was to establish:

- the features of a blended learning model that would meet the needs of rural and remote employees in the over 45 age bracket
- the level of success of the model trialled, and
- policy recommendations.

Although the research was undertaken within QAS, it was representative of any large and dispersed organisation that is its own Registered Training Organisation (RTO) but has relationships with other education institutions for specific offerings. It was undertaken within the contexts of a service undergoing the pressures of a growing State where medical practitioners have been withdrawing their immediate presence from many small country areas leaving the local ambulance officer as the first responder in medical emergency situations. In addition, the first of the programs associated with the Diploma of Paramedic Science (Ambulance) HLT50402 were being undertaken. In the background were factors such as the worldwide skills shortage, the opportunities for well-qualified officers to leave the service, and the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) objectives of learner and business-centred vocational education and training (VET) services that were inclusive of Aboriginal and Islander people.

Factors considered in the relevant literature included:

- lifelong and adult learning
- individual learning
- organisational learning
- workplace literacy and computer literacy
- support for change
- VET in Australia.

Action research methodology was used and involved four stages:

- clarification of the problems to be dealt with.
- trial of some interventions and review of others already underway.
- analysis of the effects of the interventions.
- make recommendations to contribute to future planning.

Stage 1: Clarification of the problem

The problem of access to staff development opportunities was seen as a major problem within the organisation. While problems of distance and cost of transport were issues, as were access to effective technology, it emerged that the personal factor of disengagement was a critical issue. The issue of learner engagement became paramount.

Telephone survey

This formed the backbone of the research and canvassed issues such as:

- how do you prefer to learn?
- how do you learn?
- how do you relate to technology?
- what is your preferred learning style?
- in what clinical areas do you want up-skilling?
- what combination of ways would you like this to happen?

The results showed people eager to learn, but in their own preferred ways. These tended to be at the low end of the technological continuum such as face-to-face, personal contact, CD-ROMs to be used in their timeframes, emailed notes, emailed PowerPoints and video-conferencing or a combination of several. It appeared that some assessment requirements were deterrents to recognised learning and performance. In response to these results it was possible to plan interventions and reviews.

Stage 2: Planned interventions and review of initiatives

The purpose of these activities was to ascertain the effectiveness of different types of blended learning combinations for teaching skills as well as for engaging and for re-engaging learners.

Activity one

This consisted of two different video-conferencing activities. Both were designed to test video-conferencing as a means of engaging learners in key activities while using relatively

easy, tried technology. One activity was in far north Queensland - Cairns and Weipa. Its sole purpose was to re-engage the disengaged learner by personal interaction and confirmation of his existing knowledge base by way of a presentation about the cardio-vascular system. The other activity was in Toowoomba to seven remote stations. This was a teaching session on the use of the Laryngeal Mask Airway. It enabled officers to see a demonstration carried out by a specialist anaesthetist who explained his every move on the airways manikin. The issues that officers had or felt that they could encounter in the use of this equipment were raised and answered immediately. Clarification was sought and given immediately. At the officers' request, a recording was made onto DVD so that the stations could all have an in-station reference. As all officers had received a copy of the doctor's PowerPoint by email before the event, this was a well executed, blended learning activity which received complete satisfaction among the participants.

Activity two

This was a review of the effectiveness of online discussion forums either already in existence in QAS or in the process of being set up. One was the Medical Director's Forum where any officer could pose a problem of a clinical nature and receive direct communication from the Medical Director. This was an effective mode of learning - albeit informal learning. It ensured that participants were using the technology as a problem-solving tool. This appeared to be a useful bridging process to the acceptance of technology as a tool instead of the "monster to be mastered".

Another forum was the "Wouldn't it be great if...". This enabled a flow of ideas to be established. Some were creative solutions while others were mere personal venting. However, it appeared that both served a useful purpose. Again the technology was merely a tool and enabled people to have a say.

Activity three

This was a review of an innovation trialled recently in one part of the State where staff were rotated from remote locations for a block of time, allowing them to bring spouse and family with accommodation provided. This enabled the staff member to undertake more varied duties, undergo assessment of performance and have face-to-face educational experiences to supplement distance learning activities.

Activity four

This was a review of several internal activities designed to ensure effective performance by educators. This is critical if disengagement is to be avoided in the learning and assessment processes.

These included:

- Clinical Call Responsibility where educators were required to serve as back-up call for road duty. This ensured currency in a clinical sense.
- Workplace Trainer and Assessor Networks and Staff Development activities through Flexible Learning Leaders and associated programs to ensure an understanding of and an ability to implement effective use of technology as well as effective training and assessment activities.
- Educators' Conference to showcase examples of excellent practice, expose educators to a range of expert models and ensure that educators were able to use the occasion as a forum to raise issues with those able to solve them.
- linking of individual development plans to performance management to assist in the prevention of the disengagement phase.

Stage 3: Analysis of the four activities to form a model

With the video-conference activities, two major conditions for success were determined. Firstly, it was necessary to have access to superior digital equipment. Secondly, it was necessary to ensure that preparation for the presentation was thorough and that the material was presented in a challenging manner.

While some internal issues arose relating to moderation with the online discussion forum, this medium which was currently used successfully for informal teaching could be extended to form a basis for extended formal contributions. The partially formulated Educators' Forum could form the basis for this. It was also seen as critical that all employees, including student paramedics, had effective access to these services.

Staff rotation has proved successful in engaging learners to date. This was particularly successful where learners were already self-aware of performance needs and self-directed.

With reference to the educator staff development, analysis showed the necessity for provision of individually-based programs. These need to enable access to a range of suitably designed materials, offered by highly capable educators. Alongside these requirements were the needs for access to technology services of a high quality and to opportunities for time dedicated to learning. The relevance and the timeliness of activities were important, as was the need for challenge and consistent underpinning frameworks.

Stage 4: Reflections, implications and recommendations

Analysis of the activities revealed concerns with stimulating and engaging teaching and learning materials, as well as the need for individual attention or some face-to-face activities. This needed to be supported by effective technology and offerings that would enable employees to manage themselves, their learning and their work environment. Included in this range of offerings would be workplace and computer literacy support. However, those facilitating the learning needed support to build an innovative range of teaching skills.

Recommendations in brief centre on a series of actions essential to effective blended learning models:

It is recommended that RTOs, employers and trainers cooperate in order to:

- provide learning materials that are challenging to the learner.
- provide learning materials that have a strong underpinning framework to enable learners to build a complete picture.
- provide timely access to high quality, technology services.
- use simple activities to bridge people from their existing skill levels to a more complex use of technology in a way that technology becomes a tool to master problems, not a problem to be mastered.
- extend the use of informal online discussion to a more formal structured use of asynchronous discussion.
- use high quality video-conferencing to enable the personal face-to-face aspect to be utilised for immediate feedback and problem resolution, with the use of DVD copies for in-station reference.
- use management opportunities to build communication loops for problem-solving and feedback and blended learning.

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- encourage learners to be proactive in negotiating their learning plans and assessment times and types, taking responsibility for the outcomes.
- provide workplace literacy and computer literacy activities to assist learners who are dealing with new styles of information or who have gaps in their literacy skill range.
- provide management programs that are workplace-based but linked to national qualifications.
- extend the capabilities of educators by a range of means to ensure that delivery, planning and creation of learning materials provide a range of best-fit options for the stage, style and situation of the learners.
- undertake additional research to determine what different teaching strategies should be adopted to maximise effectiveness of competency-based teaching as opposed to curriculum-based strategies currently employed.

In short, a successful blended learning model for adult, remote, rural and diverse employees focuses on challenge, personal support and offerings appropriate to the learners, supplied by highly skilled educators who are comfortable with using technology and with assisting learners in bridging the gap to using high quality technology as a tool for effective learning.