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Transferring Learning between the Classroom and the Workplace – A Case Study Involving Indigenous Students

I would also like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we're meeting today and pay my respects to the Elders.

I would like to start talking to you about the different kind of program that we have put together for our Indigenous students. The genesis of this case study started in 2002 when we had presented a program for Indigenous students funded by DEWR (The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations) and at that time they were trying to look at something that was different, they were trying to look at being proactive.

We were fortunate in winning one of the tenders and we delivered the program but unfortunately, although the program was a lot more successful than most of the other Indigenous programmes, from an educational perspective, we felt that it was far too functional and it lacked the passion that the graduates should have had at the end of it. We went back to the drawing board and as they always say the necessity is the mother of invention and it certainly was with us.

We looked at some of the possible kinds of theories that we could look at to give us some insights. We started looking at the emancipatory theories including the seminal work of Friere; we looked at reproduction and the habitus theory of Bourdieu and Passeron, and we looked at learning transfer.

We looked at the emancipatory and reproduction theories because we were dealing with Indigenous people – they're the most disadvantaged people in Australia – especially from an educational perspective and so we so had to, look at theories that dealt with that kind of situation.

Friere looked at what he felt that education should be about and it was certainly not about memorizing, which he calls the banking method, memorisation and rote learning. What we were looking at how we could provide a program that would provide critical thinking that would actually create professionals.

We also looked at the concept of habitus particularly because habitus provided an insight into where Indigenous people are; they come from a different cultural background, the way they've been brought up. In fact, the problem arises when the habitus doesn't quite fit into the educational system and if you know enough about Indigenous culture, it doesn't necessarily fit in with the culture of the educational system and all our students had come from a very disadvantaged background particularly educationally. Most of them had failed and dropped out. So we had to look at how we could do this.

We looked at the whole of the literature on learning transfer, from Thorndike to Billet. What we came up with was that what we really needed was two learning sites: the workplace site as a learning site, and the actual formal learning site which was obviously the formal learning that we were going to be presenting to the students. We had to look at linking the students' backgrounds, we couldn't have the kind of training where they just sat in rows or they had work books, we had

to get them critically thinking. So what we did was, we actually tried to link those two working sites and we did this in a formal structured way.

The first thing we did was look at employing the students. We got funding from DEWR we found jobs for all the students that we were going to place. We actually had thirty placements that we had to find across Victoria so we found the placements, we then found the students for the placements and we linked them together.

The formal learning environment we linked by having a retreat-like learning, so they came into Melbourne and were put into a bubble for a couple of days, a learning bubble as we said. We then looked at the transfer then more actively, particularly the competencies because we felt that competencies and the underpinning knowledge of the competencies didn't link together.

If you look at competencies: you've got your elements, you've got your performance criteria and somewhere after that you've got a whole list of knowledge. None of them actually get linked in, we took all the competencies and looked at what are the concepts coming out of those competencies.

We started looking at the actual concepts; we were still adhering to the competencies but we were going further, to give you an idea, in one of the competencies is prepare and maintain beds was aged care me, since then we've moved on to childcare and onto welding.

What we found was there were lots of concepts under this competencies. Concepts that went right the way through all the competencies. One for example, was infection control, that's an extremely important concept in aged care, If you've seen all the problems we've had in Melbourne recently, you'd understand what I mean.

A real problem but it's hardly touched it because most of the competencies are really tasks rather than the underpinning knowledge. So our students learnt the principles and then they engage, because we transferred it not only into the workplace but from competency to competency so what they started off with maintaining a bed, they actually then went on to showering. It wasn't the principles that changed, the concept that changed, what changed was the context and our students could understand that. It was exciting for them because they understood it.

Experiential learning was something that we looked at transferring in from the formal learning environment. We wanted it to be exciting, so we wanted to use the learning that the students learnt in the workplace. If you know Kolb's cycle of experiential learning it starts off with concrete experience, it moves to a reflection it then moves to abstraction and then it moves to application and then it goes on again.

We use concrete experience from the employment and we then looked at that and we reflected on it, the students thought about it, they came in, they didn't know what infection control was, they knew what they were doing so we actually pulled that out of them, we classified that, we named it. 'We' meaning not us, 'we' meaning the group, the facilitator was there facilitating it but they named it as a group, we didn't take charge, we facilitated and they came out with infection control, they took ownership of it because it was their's.

They understood what it was because they'd actually done the concrete experience so we went through the concrete experience, we reflected on it, then the abstraction came about what they understood with infection control and then of course what happened was, they went back and applied it (so if you see our arrow goes that way).

We also linked complex issues. One of the ways we did that was we had mentors. There is a huge number of complex issues, one of them is sexuality in the aged. Instead of teaching that - which is pretty difficult to do so - we used workplace learning mentors, we got the facilities that we were working with to nominate that workplace learning mentor – we call them workplace learning mentors not mentors.

We made sure they had a role in workplace learning because we trained them, we didn't just leave it for luck. Might I say that none of them understood the concept part of it, they tended to do with making a bed, they tended to concentrate on the envelope corners and which way we put the pillows.

They didn't look at infection control, of course they knew about it but that was a tacit knowledge but wasn't coming out. So if our students had gone in there without us training them, they wouldn't have got that knowledge because the workplace learning mentors hadn't identified it, so it meant that we had to help them do that, we trained them to make sure they did it so that our students got the best out of it that they could get.

The way we also did these complex issues and sexuality in the workplace in the aged was interesting. We got them to raise issues and then they instructed actors to act out these issues, we work a lot with professional actors. They acted those scenarios front of the students and we pulled out the knowledge that they got from their workplace and what they heard and then that went back obviously then to the workplace so there was this two way thing going on all the time.

The journal was a very important aspect as well. We set journal activities and also they wrote up their journal and what they done, and saw and felt and critically thought about and so there was a link back and forth. Assignments were allocated and they gathered information from the workplace.

Professional hour was also important one because as Helen talked about this morning, they learn a lot from a workplace which is not necessarily included in the competencies and they were learning a lot from the workplace about what was happening socially, what was being required of them, what was the management requiring of them. We found instead of them coming back and complaining, we turned it into a positive professional hour where they actually brought back their issues and turned it into solutions and then went back again and practiced those solutions and reported back to us when they reflected on them again, very important part.

Our program was really trying to pull together those two learning sites, the workplace and the formal learning place so it was the workplace learning site and the formal learning site. We structured it that way, did it work? Did the planned interaction between the two learning sites really work? Yes it did, sometimes it didn't.

The program worked when the worksite understood the purpose and we were trying to do, was to produce thinking professionals and they all had a passion for caring for the elderly. If they didn't, then that made it much more difficult because where the workplace lacked the passion themselves, where caring was just a job, and employees constantly cut corners, it was problematic because there was discordant because they were coming from a formal learning environment where they were experiencing excitement about all these things and they were going back o the workplace and there wasn't happening.

What it did for the students was it actually helped them to decide whether they wanted to stay on there after they learnt and they got their Cert III, and many of them didn't; They made a choice and went to another employer who could provide what they wanted there. Something very unusual for Indigenous people, because most of them had been on benefits, they never had the choice like that to make.

From a participant's perspective, from a student's perspective, they felt that the workplace learning mentor was really important – somebody who understood what they were learning in the formal learning environment so you had that linking together. Many of them had made lasting friendships out of with their workplace learning mentors.

The choice of the workplace learning mentor was very critical and that was left to the workplace because we could not go in and choose and if the mentor was chosen very carefully then it worked really well, if it wasn't, then it didn't work as well and the participants really felt very strongly that they didn't have that support and it not only impeded the workplace learning but it also impeded the formal learning process. It's a problem which we quite don't know how to overcome.

Did any unstructured learning occur? Yes it did, they learned a lot about how the workplace works, many of them had never worked before, and they soon learned about pay and how to get their pay. Many of them didn't have pay for the first couple of weeks because they forgot to put their time sheets in, they found out they couldn't be late otherwise they would find that they would be disciplined. As Mariam says in her research, negative experiences often have a big effect on learning but one of the things that happened was the change in their whole life experience. Without this kind of learning, I don't think it would have happened.

Many of the facilities who took part actually learned a lot too, they learn a lot about what workplace learning could really look like and many of them want to continue on. And their staff members learned a lot as well.

Was the program successful in terms of Indigenous students? Yes it was, in the last year we had child care, we had 30 places and 28 of our students graduated. We've hardly had anything under 63 per cent that was on our very first program when we were learning at that time, since then we've had 86 per cent plus. What about long-term benefits? Well they're being really fantastic, most of our students are still in the industry that they started with us and one of our students became a policy manager in her facility six months after graduating and she handled all the accreditation about four weeks ago for her facility and she's been qualified now for two and half years.

On a social level, a student who had always been on benefits and hadn't been working, living in a commission house, said to her children, would you like to live in one of these houses as she drove around a new estate that was being built in Mildura and the kids said 'yes but Mum dream on', six months later she was in that house, and she said she'll never, never, never, never, never not work again, she likes her en suite far too much!

Is the program transferable to a non-Indigenous people? Absolutely, absolutely, we didn't do anything that was particularly Indigenous, we just went with our students, we knew our students, we tried to do what we could with linking that employment, the workplace and formal learning sites together and it could work anywhere and I just thought you'd might like to see some of our students graduating (referring to slides), The top ones are our aged care students who graduated in last August, the bottom ones are our child care students who graduated last December.

Welding, if I can just put a P.S. here before I finish, welding hasn't been so successful, not because we didn't have enough students but because we haven't been able to get enough employers. Everybody has said there's a skills shortage in the area of welding. In our experience they don't want to train, they really just want to get somebody in from overseas who is trained. We have a whole group of people who it is critical that we look after, and they cannot get work in welding, we've been to nearly every welding shop in Victoria and we started in NSW our program in last August and we're soon to graduate out students and it's been a success and I'm hopeful that we're going to continue in NSW.