

Integrated Literacy- making it work

Lessons from the Course in Applied Vocational Skills in Western Australia

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What is integrated literacy? In access and bridging courses, integration is likely to mean that the subject areas such as reading, writing and maths are taught in holistic way. The various learning outcomes are integrated together for teaching and assessment purposes rather than seen as isolated discrete skills.

Some literacy practitioners would only see this as integration where literacy and numeracy competencies are contextualised within activities based around student life goals or learning interests. The TAFE Frontier flexible learning materials for the Certificates of General Education for Adults are an example of this approach. The writers used topics such as “Science and the Environment: how does your garden grow” as a means of integrating the delivery of a range of learning outcomes across CGEA streams.

While I acknowledge the value of this form of integrated literacy for students in bridging courses, this paper is focused on an even higher level of integration where literacy teaching and learning is integrated into a vocational training context. This paper summarises the findings of many years of work in Western Australia that investigated the key factors that allowed successful integration of literacy into VET training. This work

has resulted in the development of a model of integrated literacy training accredited as the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS).

I will consider how this form of integrated literacy might be more effective in meeting the needs of many offenders by providing an alternative means of literacy development apart from stand-alone course delivery.

Doing it differently

CAVSS incorporates a model of literacy service that is very different to courses designed as stand-alone literacy courses. This is because the students targeted by the course are very different. They are not literacy students who have chosen to seek skills and/or credit in a general education sense, either as a bridge to further study or to make up for previous gaps in education. CAVSS is targeted at students whose goal is to achieve competence in an industry related skill or vocation. While literacy language and numeracy skills are seen as important where they are required in the relevant employment field, most vocational students have little patience with teachers who want to impart generic literacy skills unrelated to the student's immediate goals. The CAVSS model accepts the validity of this resistance to literacy courses that impose additional burdens on the students above the requirements of their vocational course.

Working on the assumption that the students do know what is best for them, the CAVSS development team identified the things vocational students dislike about traditional forms

of literacy assistance, especially those services targeted at those who seem to need it most. Generally, students seemed to dislike:

- Missing parts of their course which left them further behind,
- Being singled out as needing special assistance,
- Spending more years doing generic learning before being allowed to do practical applied learning,
- Paying extra fees, doing extra assessment tasks, and spending more time than students not receiving the “assistance”,
- Learning stuff that seemed irrelevant to their vocational course.

Students in vocational training seemed to want:

- To learn the literacy and numeracy skills that they need to achieve the goals they have at present, rather than large amounts of de-contextualised learning intended for later on,
- To have their current language and literacy practices valued and new practices relevant to their current or future employment taught as they needed them,
- To be taught literacy and numeracy skills that were essential for success in the assessment and training context.

The vision that guided the development and implementation of CAVSS was to create a model of literacy support that students would readily accept and then develop a funding mechanism that would allow us to offer this in the current Western Australian VET system. The goal was effective assistance closely targeted to student learning goals at no

extra cost, no extra time without additional assessment load. Earlier experiments with integrated literacy suggested that the crucial element that could achieve these goals was effective team teaching where expertise in literacy development and expertise in the relevant industry was offered to students jointly by two teachers. Pilots of the resulting model show it to be highly acceptable to students when applied as recommended and possible to operate within current WA funding models. See attachment A for further information about the model.

Application to offender education

Offenders who resist involvement in formal education but are willing to learn new skills in industrial or other work environments may benefit from a similar model of integrated literacy. In my work with educators in WA prisons, I have been told that many offenders respond best to learning that takes place outside the education centre. The immediate conclusion may be that this is simply a rejection of a formal learning environment that in any way smacks of school because school has already seriously failed most of these learners. I suggest that the prospective students are rejecting not just the environment but the sorts of academic learning that takes place in a classroom environment.

If educators wanted to use CAVSS in a custodial setting, the funding and management arrangements will possibly be different from those we needed to adopt within the WA VET system, depending on the funding arrangements for offender education in your jurisdiction. However, I propose that the underlying model, the principles of integrating

the literacy learning and teaching into the day to day industry-based work and learning would work. I also see you facing similar barriers to making it work though perhaps the barriers may be more intense in some ways.

Making it work

Like the TAFE system, you will need to find educators with in-depth knowledge of literacy development who are not so entrenched in the culture of broad general education that they cannot focus on the needs of “this learner, in this environment, at this time”. The ideal literacy teacher for CAVSS would be someone who is willing to let go of control, act as a student to learn the language practices relevant to the industry environment, and to identify the literacy and numeracy skills needed, and observe which of these are actually a problem for the students. The literacy teacher needs to avoid pushing literacy as an end in itself. Effective CAVSS teachers are reflective, able to consider what are the needs of the individual and group in this context and how best to meet those needs. See attachment B for a model of how to select such staff.

Similarly, you will need to find industry-based teachers who are willing to risk close collaboration with a literacy teacher. The risk is real. People with vocational qualifications were less likely to get recognition from English and maths teachers at school for their competence and intelligence. Therefore, in addition to the disquiet all of us may feel when we face sharing a teaching or facilitation role, there is the real fear of being judged and found wanting all over again. Vocational teaching staff may also feel

the need to protect their students from over-zealous teachers. Another valid fear is of having their learning environment disrupted by a literacy teacher insisting on shifting the focus to irrelevant skills and thus distracting students from the task of building and demonstrating competence in the vocational area. See Attachment C for ideas about how to provide information to industry staff about the model and what they might expect from it.

Collaborative teams are needed to make the CAVSS model work. Arranging team teaching is seldom easy. The autonomy of teachers is not easily relinquished. Choice about who works together provides significant advantages over teams matched by an external party.

The role of assessment

Beware of the trap of getting bogged down in extensive pre-assessment. When first introducing integrated literacy into vocational settings, a common assumption is that detailed initial assessment is a crucial aspect of meeting the needs of industry based learners. This view could be put by management who often assume that if they had very detailed knowledge of who needs literacy and numeracy development than they will be able to better enforce participation in training to address the skills gaps, “for the good of the student”. It is sometimes driven by industry staff who think that it will make classes easier because those people who are identified as having deficits will be removed from

class until they can do better. Literacy staff could subscribe to either of these beliefs and are likely to be convinced that pre-assessment will allow better program planning.

Many participants in the CAVSS pilots in WA would argue that initial assessment is a waste of resources. Successful CAVSS teachers found there was no need to assess literacy skills before commencing the activities which students would do as part of their vocational course. The needed skills were immediately obvious once the literacy teacher was part of the learning environment and activities.

Even outside of the CAVSS context, I doubt the value of attempts to apply blanket assessments to prospective students. When this is done, often no suitable services are offered to many of the people assessed. The assessment becomes a meaningless measurement exercise, which may only entrench feelings of inadequacy in the assessed. It is better to assume that any group of offenders will have a range of skill gaps, from significant to minor. Australian Bureau of Statistics surveys show this to be true of 82% of the general population and offenders certainly exhibit the same needs or more. Therefore, simply provide for literacy development needs as routinely and unremarkably as you do for any other learning need, such as relevant hand skills or underpinning knowledge.

Want to know more?

I have attached some samples of materials developed as part of the CAVSS Implementation project in WA. These provide more in-depth description of the CAVSS model, and flyers that can be used to explain the model to various audiences. Further materials are being developed as part of the implementation process. Acknowledgement goes to Susan Bates, CAVSS Implementation Officer and Margaret McHugh Principal Consultant Literacy for the use of these materials.

If you are interested in applying the lessons WA has learnt from the development and implementation of the CAVSS model in an offender education program, I may be contacted for advice as to your next steps on 0892356180 or by email to wiltch@royalst.training.wa.gov.au.

Attachment A

The structure and purpose of the Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS)

Susan Bates, Department of Training, WA, 2001

The Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) is a framework for a wholly collaborative approach to meeting VET students' literacy support needs. The purpose of CAVSS is to improve completion rates among VET students by modeling and teaching the connections between 'theoretical' literacy and numeracy skills and processes and their practical VET application. CAVSS is a process for making literacy, numeracy and study skills support a normal, unremarkable part of VET delivery, and for all students instead of just a few that have been singled out for their lack of skills.

CAVSS is an accredited course, and as a means for accessing public training funds, students are enrolled in from one to eight ten-hour modules which generally translate into up to four hours total teaching time for the literacy specialist per week, per student group. The content of the modules is nominal. Modules have no specific AQF level, and are not assessable. Students may only access CAVSS support on a dual enrolment basis with a VET course or Training Package qualification. The delivery of CAVSS may not impose extra burdens of attendance, or assignments on students, and students may not be charged enrolment fees for CAVSS. The requirement for CAVSS to be delivered by two lecturers (or trainers) means that CAVSS is more suited to delivery in an institutional setting.

However, it is important to spread CAVSS delivery over both theoretical and practical (workshop or live worksite) training sessions.

The following case studies illustrate how the prescribed model can be applied to integrate literacy, numeracy and study skills support at the point of direct application to the industry training and assessment activities.

CAVSS Case Study 1

Sue Clarke is a Business Studies lecturer at the Broome Campus of the Kimberley College of TAFE. As in many smaller centres, students in her course need to study in a range of independent learning modes, including the use of self-paced packages, on-line modules, and with flexible timetable arrangements. Sue has found that many students struggle, and some drop out, because they are unable to access the support they need at the beginning of the course, to understand the requirements they need to meet. The students need to be able to apply a range of reading skills as a basis for accessing and organising information to support their independent learning. Many students are confused by all of the books they receive at once, are not sure when assignments are due, and where to get information, and need assistance in clarifying their own individual responsibilities to complete the course. The students have the pre-requisite skills to develop the industry competencies within the course, but the applied reading/study skills they need, particularly as new students coming into the course, overwhelmed some students.

Sue worked with Jo Camilleri, a literacy lecturer at the college, to deliver CAVSS support. They identified the beginning of the course as the point at which students needed a significant amount of support in finding out what they needed to do, and understand and organise to study in an independent, open learning mode. The lecturers arranged for CAVSS to be delivered each day during the first week and enrolled the students in two modules to provide the teaching hours for this.

During the first week, students had extra support in reading self-paced study manual instructions, table of contents etc, and in organising their individual study time-tables, including scheduling assessments and linking in with on-line delivery. These are applied reading and study skills, absolutely valid for CAVSS support. Students who would have otherwise dropped out due to the confusion they feel when first starting open learning, found their feet and continued with the course.

CAVSS Case Study 2

Gordon Bates is a Course in Applied Vocational Study Skills (CAVSS) lecturer who works in the Building and Construction section of a large metropolitan college. He is currently working with Scott Kay, a VET lecturer, with a group of Pre-Apprenticeship (Plastering) students. Gordon and Scott have found that a collaborative approach, using a tag-teaching strategies, has resulted in dynamic, effective lessons and new insights.

"Recently I was working with one of the Plastering lecturers and some Pre-Apprenticeship students. These Pre-Apprenticeship students need quite a lot of support, including a lot of basic maths. The VET lecturer, Scott, and I had planned to do some work on how to go about setting out and calculating a quote.

We started by taking turns to talk about aspects of organising information for a quote, getting ideas from the students about the factors that needed to be incorporated. Then Scott went into a story. He started telling the students some horror stories about the process of quoting. He was impressing on them how important it was to be careful and accurate in quotes, and how if you weren't the mistake would cost you money. Scott told them about how he had lost a considerable amount of money quoting from a plan for a plastering job, because although the plan gave him the perimeter of each room, it did not identify that the walls had been built taller than usual. He had given a firm quote for the job, it had been accepted, and he lost money because the job ended up costing him significantly more than he had quoted.

As Scott told the story, in a lot of detail, I got busy on the whiteboard, drawing up a list of factors, setting up the calculations that had to be done in each case. He kept on story telling, and the students were really interested in what was going on. The students are always interested in hearing the real stuff about aspects of the industry. When Scott had finished the story, I went through the processes I had written up on the board, and went over some of the key factors to keep in mind with the class. Then we asked the students to break into groups, and they went outside to work on their quotes while we moved

around from one group to the next discussing some of the details, and checking over maths processes.

As the students came back in, Scott suggested, in the ‘is it OK with you?’ way that we suggest things to each other, that we get the students to present their final quotes first, without any costing information, and see what the reactions were. I agreed, and it was on for young and old. The students took the competitive aspect of the exercise very seriously. They demanded to know how others had come up with very different costings, and queried where other groups had omitted essential equipment, or made incorrect calculations, and even worked out how much money would have been lost because of the errors. Each group had to justify their costings, and there was a lot of discussion about the psychology of quotes, and how the lowest quote was not always the one that got the job. They got experience in ‘selling’ themselves and their industry skills and knowledge, and some very useful practice in applying their spoken language skills in a very industry-specific way.”