Applied Learning in the Senior Years of High School – A Systemic Approach in the State of Victoria, Australia

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Abstract

System-wide strategies to increase participation in education and training at the senior years of high school have been adopted in several countries, in the belief that completion of a senior high school certificate (or equivalent vocational training) will improve life outcomes for young people. In this context, the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), was introduced in 2002 as a systemic learning approach to augment traditional senior high schooling in the State of Victoria, Australia.This paper examines how this relatively new approach to schooling is understood to have a positive impact on students' learning and development. The applied learning principles underpinning the program are described, and a program outline is provided. Key elements for program success are also discussed. This work is based on a brief review of relevant literature, my ethnographic research into a VCAL program, and on my practice as a facilitator and observer of VCAL programs and initiatives since 2005. The Victorian experience could provide future inspiration for any school system working towards improved outcomes for students in the senior years of high school.

The development of VCAL

In response to deep concerns about the future of early school leavers in the State of Victoria, Australia, the Ministerial Review of Post Compulsory Education and Training Pathways (Kirby, 2000), was commissioned. The review indicated that a broader range of programs was required to slow the rate of early school leavers and consequently manage larger numbers of students staying on at school. Findings were that many young people felt constrained by the prevailing education system because their individual learning, personal development and transition needs could not be fully met by didactic or transmissive approaches to teaching and learning. Many students were not engaged, not achieving their best results and were leaving school early, inadequately prepared for work and future learning. Additionally, the rise in the number of early school leavers was occurring during a slump in the youth labour market. As a result VCAL was introduced in 2002 as an alternative to the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE).The curriculum structure was a significant change, allowing providers to design their own programs according to the needs of students, within a range of flexible learning outcomes and assessment activities. The core pedagogical principles of applied learning underpin the VCAL.

Applied Learning

Applied learning is commonly referred to as 'hands-on learning' (Dewey, 1938) and is consistent with constructivist ideas about learning and curriculum. The VCAL is marketed as 'The Hands on Option'. (VCAA, 2016). Applied learning is traditionally employed in vocational training and higher education programs by connecting student learning to 'real world' applications. Students are given the opportunity to undertake learning activities in real workplaces and community contexts. The significant potential for applied learning to underpin a senior high school qualification has been recognized internationally e.g. Figure 1. International Applied Learning Qualifications in High Schools

Country	Qualification	Citation
United Kingdom	The Diploma	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2008)
Ireland	LVCP	LCVP Office. (1998).
Hongkong	ApL	http://www.edb.gov.hk
Singapore	ALP	http://www.moe.gov.sg/media

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These qualifications represent a new vision in senior secondary schooling. The common thread is the intention to secure a coherent, meaningful and engaging learning experience that spans school, community and workplace environments - students apply new knowledge in a variety of real world applications and can see the point of what they are doing. Teachers establish a focus for students, something of interest and relevance to them. They establish outcomes and write the teaching and learning activities around that. Students are involved in some prior learning or research, then get out into the community to try the skills in real life situations. On return to the classroom they reflect on their experiences to find ways to improve their skills. Assessment is by way of observation, stakeholder feedback, and student reflection - have they achieved the desired outcome? Experience in multiple community contexts is desirable.

VCAL structure

The program design was based on alternative programs running in individual schools around the state and also on some best practice examples from the UK. A VCAL report (Walsh, et al, 2005) discussed five key components critical to success - **Curriculum, Organisation, Pedagogy, Resources and Community**. In VCAL, these requirements are very different to mainstream schooling. These headings can be used to describe the structure of the VCAL.

Curriculum

The curriculum provides a 'shell' or a framework of outcomes so that teachers can write their own curriculum content based around student interests, community needs and available resources.VCAL has three levels - Foundation, Intermediate and Senior, with four 'strands' of study at each level. Figure 2 . VCAL Study Strands.

Literacy & Numeracy	-reading, writing and oracy for research, reflection, and communication. -design, measuring, constructing, graphs, money, time and travel.
Industry Specific Skills	Vocation and Education Training (VET) related to a specific industry context
Work Related Skills (WRS)	Developing employability skills within community and work environments.
Personal Development Skills (PDS)	Community project based, developing social responsibility, community building, confidence and self-esteem.

Each strand has a number of outcomes, including explicit outcomes relating to employability skills, e.g. Figure 3 – VCAL Learning Outcome example (VCAA, 2016)

LEARNING OUTCOME 1 - Plan and organise a complex project or activity.

1.1 Plan, organise and carry out a project or activity in relation to one or more of the following: self, social, health and wellbeing, education and or family. The project or activity will involve a number of steps and processes.

1.2 Identify and use appropriate resources related to a project or activity.

1.3 Identify positive and negative factors that influence and impact individual behaviour and motivation in group situations.

1.4 Carry out the project or activity to completion.

1.5 Reflect upon the personal achievements and challenges of the project or activity.

The process of developing any type of community project, for instance running events; working in special schools and primary schools; working on projects in partnership with environmental or community groups; building gardens or refurbishing buildings; can enable students to meet the outcomes. Programs are collaboratively designed, and meet the needs of students, local workplaces and communities. Integrating strands is encouraged.

> Students undertaking the VCAL assemble their program from a wide range of education and training resources as well as combining community and work-based learning contexts that provide for their individual interests and vocational aspirations (Blake, 2007, p59).

Organisation

Planning and organisational flexibility is needed to facilitate out of school experiences. A typical week for a VCAL student, 'Jane', could look something like this – Figure 4. Sample VCAL timetable.

	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY
P1	Literacy	Literacy	Literacy	Structured	PDS
P2 Recess	Numeracy	Numeracy	Numeracy	Workplace	Community
P3	VCE Subject	VCE Subject	VCE Subject	Learning	Project
P4 Lunch	PDS Project	WRS Research	VETis @	Placement in	Private
P5	Planning	& Reflection	TAFE College	Industry	Study

This allows for her to be out on Wednesday afternoon, all day Thursday and all day Friday. Providers can adhere to a conventional school timetable and operate their VCAL within it, others create a separate VCAL campus, and others use a mixture of time planning and staffing strategies. Crucially, time is needed for students to experience work in the community.

Pedagogy

VCAL teacher skill set and attitude is different to normal classroom teaching. The VCAL teacher needs the skills, patience and persistence to develop pedagogical experiences that engage with different life and cultural contexts, including community and workplace cultures. Relationship building is core. Teachers engage in the principles of adult learning and teaching, or andragogy (Knowles, 1980) where learners are more motivated to learn because learning activities are related to their daily lives and they can see the point of what they are doing.

> VCAL offers teachers the chance to be flexible, creative and inventive and enables them to look outside the school grounds for inspiration and program possibilities…You will also be able to establish and build strong working relationships with your students based on an adult approach to learning. (VCAL First 2013, p6)

Resources

Resources for a VCAL program need to include flexible teaching spaces to support adult learning principles; diverse teaching materials including ICT and tools for projects; suitable industry work placements; logistical and funding resources including transport and planning time; professional learning and support for teachers; and community-based resources and partnerships (Walsh, et al 2005). Some providers have been able to build up resource banks and specialised learning spaces like gardens, sheds and VCAL classrooms. Students have played a role in development of the resources as part of their community projects. Some programs are funded through community fundraising or grants.

Community

The ability to cross boundaries between school and the community - being involved in real life experiences alongside adults and learning in different ways in each setting - is at the heart of VCAL.

> Communities can have a major impact on the outcomes of children and young people. Children and young people have performed better where schools have utilised the variety of networks, organisations and activities available in the community. (DEECD, 2013, p1)

My research into a VCAL program suggests that the immersion in multiple work and community activities is where the 'rich learning' is occurring. Student interviews, 2015 –

> You're going out and dealing with adults a lot more often, which is forcing you to be mature.

> We learn about stuff in the classroom and actually get a chance to do it in real life, go out, and try those things in the field.

> I just think having that experience and hands-on-learning is really like getting thrown in the deep end. You just do so much more learning.

Students talk about developing employability and life skills - confidence and maturity, communication, teamwork, initiative, problem solving, work readiness, networking - rather than learning specific knowledge**.**

Claims of Success

VCAL is offered in state and indepent high schools, technical and further education colleges (TAFEs) and by a growing number of alternative providers. In 2003 there were 5,137 students enrolled at 239 providers (VCAA, 2004). In 2015 there were 23,784 students enrolled at 447 providers (VCAA, 2016). This represents approximately 20% of senior high school students in Victoria. Post school tracking data also indicates success.

> Evidence from the On Track survey suggests that VCAL helps to keep young people in school, with nine in ten VCAL students stating that VCAL played an important role in their decision to stay at school (Polesel &Rice, 2012)

> '….Victoria's tracking system for young people leaving school provides evidence of VCAL's success in helping those at high risk of dropping out too early and without qualifications... Engaged and employed young people are less likely to cost the state money because they are less likely to need healthcare, less likely to depend on welfare, and less likely to be involved in anti-social or criminal behaviour.' (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2005

A report by the Victorian auditor general shows that school completion rates for Victoria are higher than the rest of Australia and have risen significantly since the introduction of VCAL. Figure 5 - Victorian and national completion rates (20- to 24-year-old students) (Pearson, 2012)
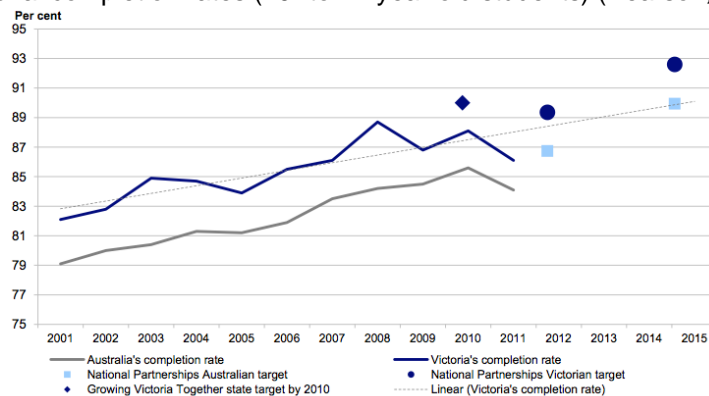
Further indicators of success are in the research e.g. (Blake, 2007, 2009; Henry & Grundy, 2004; Walsh, et al, 2005); media reports; and the annual VCAL awards which celebrate exemplary students, teachers, programs and program partners. Finally, there are student reflections on the program and what it did for them. (Student research interviews, 2015)

> The teachers help you with all your pathways and help more to identify what you actually want to do in the future, and then base your learning and your work placements and interests around that.

> The program has opened so many opportunities to not only contacts and getting to know people, but just getting to know myself really. Like in what I think I'll be able accomplish and it's definitely expanded my reach. When you look at it, it's been a real positive thing for my self-esteem and just even how like I consider myself.

Conclusion

VCAL was developed in response to growing concerns about personal, social, and economic risks created by young people leaving school early. After fourteen years of operation, evidence indicates that VCAL is playing a role in keeping students at school longer and preparing them for the work force or further study. The unique mix of various hands on activities in community and industry settings,

coupled with school based learning and adult learning pedagogies, is delivering them valuable learning experiences that they might not have received through traditional teaching approaches in mainstream high school. While it has not been without issues impacting the quality of program offerings in some cases, the Victorian experience can provide an insight into a working model for any school system working towards improved outcomes for students in the senior years of high school.

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