



APPLIED LEARNING

The concept of applied learning is often equated to 'hands on' or practical learning experiences. However, since the 1990's when increased attention was given to the links between education, training and the 'world of work', a broader definition of applied learning has emerged. This broader definition advocates an approach which contextualises learning in a way which empowers and motivates students, while assisting them to develop key skills and knowledge required for employment, further education and active participation in their communities.

What is Applied Learning?

Current understanding of the term 'applied learning' varies from State to State in Australia and from country to country. However, a number of recurring themes are consistent across all definitions and can be seen to be the underpinning principles of an applied learning approach.

Firstly, applied learning is an approach, which emphasises the relevance of what is being learnt to the 'real world', outside 'the classroom', and makes that connection as immediate and transparent as possible. This focus on a 'real life' application will often require a shift from a traditional focus on discrete curriculum areas, as students focus on learning and applying the skills and knowledge they need to solve a problem, implement a project or participate in the work force.

Secondly, and a result of this, applied learning will involve students and their teachers in partnerships and connections with organisations and individuals outside school. These partnerships provide the necessary out of school context for students to demonstrate the relevance of what they have learnt.

Thirdly, and of equal importance, applied learning is concerned with nurturing and working with a student in a holistic manner, which takes into account their personal strengths, interests, goals and previous experiences. Working with the whole person involves valuing skills and knowledge that may not normally be the focus of more traditional school curricula. It also means taking into account differences in preferred learning styles, and ways of learning.

Finally, applied learning also acknowledges that part of the transition from school to work is being treated as an adult, and that moving students out of the classroom to learn also means helping them to make a shift to become more independent and responsible for their own learning. This means that applied learning needs to be student centred and applied learning goals and outcomes should be

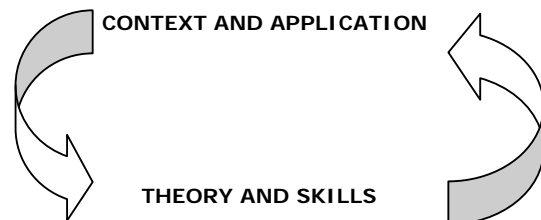
negotiated with students, as well as other stakeholders.

These key concepts underpin the following applied learning principles:

1. Start where learners are at.
2. Negotiate the curriculum. Engage in a dialogue with learners about their curriculum.
3. Share knowledge. Recognise the knowledge learners bring to the learning environment.
4. Connect with communities and real life experiences.
5. Build resilience, confidence and self worth – consider the whole person.
6. Integrate learning – the whole task and the whole person. In life we use a range of skills and knowledge. Learning should reflect the integration that occurs in real life tasks.
7. Promote diversity of learning styles and methods. Everyone learns differently. Accept that different learning styles require different learning/teaching methods. But value experiential, practical and 'hands on' ways of learning.
8. Assess appropriately. Use the assessment method that best 'fits' the learning content and context.

There's nothing as practical as a good theory

A definition of applied learning as being just 'hands on' or practical work was a concern to many educators, who saw the need to offer students access to important fields of abstract knowledge and theory. However, current understandings of applied learning place equal importance on both theory and application, where the link between them is provided by the context. Thus the theoretical understandings and knowledge required to complete a task will be drawn out from the context, which also provides the opportunity to use and apply what has been learnt.



Why use an applied learning approach?

Projects and initiatives in Australia, European countries and the USA have shown that applied learning has a number of benefits for students. These include:

- improved student motivation and commitment
- providing a context for learning the generic skills that are valued in the workplace eg. problem solving, working effectively with others and in teams, leadership and personal responsibility
- learning engages students
- improved self esteem and confidence for those involved
- improved transition for students from school to work and/or further education
- a way of catering effectively for students with different preferred learning styles
- providing a meaningful context for learning both theoretical concepts and practical skills.

Applied learning in action

Applied learning is a valuable approach, which can be used at all levels of education.

Applied learning in primary school

One applied learning activity undertaken by primary school children, from their concern that the school was not recycling paper efficiently and that students were mixing waste material with recyclable paper. They decided to offer an incentive to those who recycled correctly, by turning shredded paper into filling for decorated chair cushions, which could then be sold or given away as gifts or prizes.

The project involved students in trying out different ideas for incentives, presenting their ideas to others, preparing costings, budgets and schedules, creating appealing cover designs, writing letters and information flyers about their cushions, and developing a marketing strategy.

Applied learning in secondary school

Senior secondary school students in Victoria can choose to do the Victorian Certificate of Applied Learning (VCAL), a post-compulsory qualification which has been developed in recognition of the value of an applied learning approach. As part of this program students have been involved in a range of exciting and innovative projects that have given them an opportunity to apply and extend their skills and knowledge. Projects have included:

- a landcare project to restore a site of logical significance
- learning about local emergency services
- building and marketing cubby houses to local organisations and individuals

- collecting research for a council on community issues
- creating promotional materials for businesses
- developing and participating in a series of community radio broadcasts
- fundraising for a local charity
- hosting a cultural community dinner.

Applied Learning in TAFE and Adult and Community Education

An applied learning approach underpins the success of many TAFE and Adult and Community Education programs. For example, applied learning is an important factor in the success of apprenticeships and traineeships which are the preferred entry pathway to a wide range of occupations and that rely on students learning both in the 'classroom' and on the job. An example of another innovative applied learning project arose from a partnership between a TAFE college, a neighbourhood house and the local council. Students enrolled in a range of courses were involved in a project to regenerate a local riverside track in accordance with the council's specifications. They were involved in building paths, ensuring appropriate drainage, designing flowerbeds and planting vegetation, building ornamental and recreational structures, and in organising the official opening of the facility.