

Case study > Australian School-Based Apprenticeships in Agriculture (ASBA-AG) > South Australia > 2009

## Enhancing the learning experience for remote school-based apprentices

### River Murray Training and Riverland Trade School

#### Background

RMT<sup>1</sup> is a small private registered training organisation (RTO) dedicated to meeting workplace training needs of both individuals and organisations. It offers specialised, customised training in the primary production, wine, food processing, government, and retail sectors, as well as cross-sector employability, management, public safety and training and assessment skills.

Due to RMT largely rural-based learners, it is faced with the challenge of providing supportive flexible learning solutions to meet learning needs prescribed by a remote environment. It uses blended learning methodologies which provide students with online learning modules and virtual classrooms supported by a dedicated facilitator. Increasingly, learners are taking up Certificate III level apprenticeships through trade schools.

RMT have developed the *Certificate III in Agriculture* school-based traineeship to address a need articulated by the Riverland Trade School<sup>2</sup> in October 2008. It has also devised a plan to provide learners with a broad range of agricultural experiences that can be built on in later career pathways. The Riverland Trade School was established in 2008, and their relationship with RMT will continue to grow in response to the growing need.

The Australian School Based Apprentices<sup>3</sup> (ASBA's) involved in our project were three young people undertaking a traineeship part-time while still attending school and enrolled in a program leading to a senior secondary certificate. They are rural, practical and 'out-doorsie'; above all they are energetic country kids. The challenge has been to get them interested in sitting still long enough to engage in our e-learning programs. The approach was short, sharp and unembellished with a strong practical component. They were not interested in 'cute' and 'clever' and engaged best with models that provided real and authentic learning opportunities which broadened their career expectations and potential 'real work' outcomes. The learners had already commenced training in the *Certificate III in Agriculture* before the project was undertaken.

The funding provided by the South Australian Framework E-learning Innovations project enabled RMT to dedicate time and resources to develop and improve materials and trainer capabilities

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<sup>1</sup> <http://r-m-t.com.au>

<sup>2</sup> <http://tradeschoolsforthefuture.sa.edu.au>

<sup>3</sup> <http://australianapprenticeships.gov.au/.../school-based.asp>

necessary to underpin the program. Without Framework funding, the initiative to expand RMT capabilities would not have received the priority dictated by the need to provide outcomes.

## What was done

The project involved investigating the complexities of learners undertaking ASBA-AG and their experiences in juggling secondary schooling and vocational education and training (VET) and in being both an employee and a learner. Work-based learning was a new learning style for most of these students who have had a lifetime of schooling framed in pedagogy.

To assist students to become self-directed, independent learners able to work within an andragogical framework, RMT investigated the specific needs of learners to pinpoint any adjustments necessary to improve current training resources and learning approaches. The first initiative was to survey learners to get a handle on how methodologies and resources could be improved to address learning needs and preferred learning style.

The survey outcomes surprised RMT, as most tend to expect all young people are into social contact through their Facebook and other social media programs, this was not so. RMT learners mostly didn't use these programs (of if they did it was irregularly) and would prefer to be outdoors doing things on the farm or on their motorbike. Over half shared an email address with their parent(s). Most had strict and limited monthly download capacity which they had to manage as a family. All had broadband access and connectivity issues were not a problem. In fact, rural folk are likely to make use of internet for information and business purposes ahead of social interactions.

RMT also addressed the issue of isolation, where learners had little opportunity to compare notes with others or share ideas. They came from family based farms with the problem of 'insular' type exposure to larger career options and potential. They all had access to computers with broadband at school and at home with personal logins and pin numbers and had no problems getting onto the site. They created a personal profile introducing themselves and posted photo's.

Some students were more IT literate than others and had to be guided through the learning objects to become aware of what a learning activity was and what constituted assessment. This was largely due to the 'spoon feed' approach of their traditional school-based learning. With a little guidance the learners soon got the hang of the way the modules were constructed, and appeared fairly confident with site navigation and requirements. The trial group was so small, and the modules were self-paced, it was difficult to facilitate a collaborative approach with learners working at different rates and on different stages of the program.

The technical trainer (Ian) had no previous experience with e-learning and needed close mentoring and practice to become confident with the use of Moodle<sup>4</sup> and the concept of e-learning. RMT Training Managers and the Resource Development Officer were actively involved with e-learning in other programs and were able to induct Ian into the use of e-learning tools and learning methodologies. As a consequence Ian overcome his trepidation of the electronic domain and can now access the e-learning centre fearlessly to check out learning resources and assessment drop-boxes and provide students with feedback.

Ian also provided one on one personalised support to trainees during scheduled workplace visits. His industry background has been invaluable in trialling and verifying the authenticity of online training and assessment tasks and resources. The trainees have engaged with the online program and assignments for two competency units have been submitted for assessment.

The standard of work was excellent with both on-job and off-job components of the assignments

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<sup>4</sup> <http://moodle.org>

adding value to the workplace as well as to the trainee. This was a great result as RMT had to develop assignment tasks which inspired a level of enthusiasm in its trainees; producing real work outcomes and meeting fairly dry competency requirements.

Resource developers attended Framework professional development workshops on social e-learning and customising Flexible Learning Toolboxes (Toolboxes) and learning objects to improve skills and identify collaborative learning and social networking possibilities. These workshops proved invaluable in developing a blog for the website, which went from a mere suggestion at the beginning of the project to a very valuable addition to the project.

RMT are making regular contributions and have improved its internal and public communication capacity 100%. Unfortunately, RMT had to conclude that for our students social networking options such as Twitter<sup>5</sup> and Facebook<sup>6</sup> were not really appropriate, as they had no real interest in sitting around 'chatting', but were more focused on getting the learning done as quickly as possible so they could jump back on the tractor. RMT have encouraged them to use the forum set up on the Moodle site and plan to get them working on some collaborative projects as the apprenticeships progress.

To develop resources RMT sourced Toolboxes, internet and other repositories to develop learning objects for the Moodle site, a free SCORM<sup>7</sup> authoring tool to design learner modules, and teamed visuals with audio in a powerpoint induction program. All learner resources were uploaded into program areas, including links, readings, worksheets and checklists. The site has progressed since the project, which commenced from one introductory occupational health and safety (OHS) unit to three units and an induction module. RMT have also managed to address some 'glitches' experienced with assessment drop boxes and module format.

RMT found tracking and validating student learning and assessment through the LMS a bit tricky. When it came down to high risk or compliance areas such as OHS induction by an employer, RMT needed evidence that not only had the boxes been ticked, but that the induction had been carried out. In the RMT ASBA Induction Module RMT developed an onsite induction checklist for employers. Completed checklists could be signed, scanned and uploaded to a Moodle drop box.

An audio powerpoint introduction for new ASBA learners, employers and parents outlining responsibilities, expectations and program details was also accessed via the Moodle site. All references, learning materials, assignments and assessment tools could be accessed by learners to encourage self-directed learning.

### **Summarising activities:**

- Develop e-learning modules to support facilitated learning and enable learners to manage in a self-directed manner to meet competency and assessment requirements.
- Develop improved methods of communication with all stakeholders by activating the site blog, implementing the induction program for learners, employers and parents and creating forum for learners and/or trainer communication.
- Provide collaborative opportunities for learners to communicate with other learners and via the online forum to help diminish their insulation and sense of isolation.
- Implement staff PD opportunities and capacity for using and adapting to e-tools.
- Identify future teaching and learning strategy to engage remote youth.

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<sup>5</sup> <http://twitter.com>

<sup>6</sup> <http://facebook.com>

<sup>7</sup> Sharable Content Object Reference Model (SCORM) is a collection of standards and specifications for web-based e-learning.

## Summarising issues:

- Developing authentic tasks for school age rather than adult learners; as some lacked the work and life experience of mature age learners.
- Not all learners had the levels of IT skills anticipated by the project team.
- Coordinating collaborative projects round students individual commitments and rates of learning.

## Benefits experienced by River Murray Training

Before commencing the project the trainer involved with the ASBA-AG program had little awareness and use of e-learning and the use of e-learning tools. By surveying the learners and stakeholders, RMT identified the type of e-learning environment needed to develop to suit the needs of learners and competency outcomes, and the skills required for trainers involved in the project.

Ian underwent training in the use of Moodle and the e-learning site, and is now able to support the trainees on all levels throughout their program whether at home, school or work. This translated into effective and efficient use of his time and resources. The skills and knowledge developed during this project will be used as evidence towards competency for the unit *TAADEL405B Coordinate and facilitate distance-based learning*.

Resources developed and trialled by the project team may also be customised for other programs or used as exemplars. Skills and knowledge gained by the team through professional development workshops and research, plus the opportunity to utilise these skills have allowed RMT to fill in the gaps. What better way of achieving learning outcomes than to complete a task which develops skills and capacity through collaboration. RMT have valuable products as an outcome.

## Lessons learnt

In general, school-based apprentices have learning needs which are different to adult learners. Resources and support need to reflect the lack of experience these trainees bring in terms of both learning and skills and knowledge.

There is generally less focus on RPL (recognition of prior learning) and more emphasis on engaging the interest of the learner and promoting and developing information pathways and repositories for 'quick fix' references. One of the trial units proved to be challenging for the learners and will be modified to include real examples and a template which can be worked on as a team project. The learning will then be generated by the learners interaction with one other and self-driven by the 'competitive' nature of the task.

To assist our trainees with the transition from pedagogy to andragogy, RMT needed strong support for its e-learning programs from dedicated trainers or facilitators who manage the traineeship both on and off job. This requires a high level of technical expertise and knowledge of principles and policies of training and assessment. The difficulty lies in recruitment of suitable qualified trainers and assessors with industry expertise. For small RTOs there is not enough work to employ these people full time.

## The results

The key outcome was to promote in learners a more independent approach to learning. An apprenticeship involves on and off-job learning application and development of employability skills during the period of the traineeship. As the students were regional and remote from peers, the formal training was accessed online and in the spirit of competency-based training using a self-paced model. RMT had both positive and negative feedback on the first two units undertaken by the students:

*“The unit was not too long...”*

*“The project was good and I liked doing the mapping.”*

*“I don’t know what you mean by an enterprise induction manual...we don’t have one where I work.”*

*“I thought the activities were a test for assessment”*

By providing the learners with resources, references and links, assessment requirements and facilitator access, it allowed them to tackle learning in bite sized chunks, they were becoming more self-directed and confident in their learning. They could access their program from work and complete any work-based component on-job.

The induction program has enabled RMT to support employers and parents and make them aware of appropriate work environments. There were few resources set up to support school-based agriculture programs. Rural Skills Australia has been developing an online version, but it is very generic and does not give opportunity for interaction.

The advantage of the Moodle environment is that it provides the freedom to bring together multiple resources, and customised assignments. RMT are committed to developing its own resources, borrowing from Toolboxes and industry resources. RMT will continue to provide feedback to the AgriFood Skills Australia on the need to encourage shared resource development; perhaps in a community of practice model that the seafood industry has used for developing assessment materials.

## Collaborative learning

RMT have previously commented on its learners disinterest in social media. Students were certainly not ‘anti-social’. The flexible learning environment, whilst providing a means to make ASBA – AG available wherever learners were situated, also meant that they were not meeting up regularly. They also commenced their programs at different times, and chose different units based on their employer in farming enterprise. This means there was limited opportunity to collaborate directly when working on a unit.

In training-speak, RMT cannot structure a program where everyone does the same unit at the same time. Yet RMT believes that so much valuable learning comes from collaborative effort. Therefore RMT continues to seek ways to add ‘collaboration’ opportunities:

- ABSA-AG facilitators have taken the opportunities to join students into other training programs that are taking place:
  - Irrigation courses run for growers.
  - Indigenous conservation and land management programs.
  - ChemCert courses and reaccreditation courses.
  - TAFE welding and automotive courses.

This was not what RMT thought of originally as collaborative learning but in hindsight it is what is happening here. Learners have their own programs online, or in print-format, but they are also

tagging along or joining other groups as they came together in the community. RMT will continue to look for collaborative community approaches to helping learners.

- As part of induction we will be mentoring trainees in the need to collaborate with other students, and set some social activities and games that support this.
- Promoting relationships between learners to sustain and foster learning experiences is RMT's main goal which is also one of the key goals of the industry. With new enrolments RMT will be including assignment activities that will have interaction with other learners. To use an old adage, a 'bit of stick' to get the carrot nibbled. In future, RMT will look for opportunities to use Moodle and the other tools to aid collaborative learning.

## Reflections and suggestions

An interesting finding from RMT's initial survey of learners enrolled in school-based agriculture apprenticeships was their disinclination to using social media for communication. This is not to suggest that they are not competent or familiar with social media, they were just typically more interested in being outside pulling down their motorbike, or working on their family farm. RMT's experience is that learners have adapted to flexible and blended learning as though it is the norm. For many rural schools, senior classes have been using open access learning for many years.

It is in the area of independent learning that learners need close monitoring and support as they transition from the structured classroom, to the applied work-based learning approach we use with trainees. Employability skills are an area that RMT will continue to work on.

RMT plans to emphasise employability skills more through units on communication, response to emergencies and to work effectively in industry. Most of the learners attracted to ABSA – AG are using their apprenticeship as an alternative to traditional lessons, and to gain skills that will get them into a trade apprenticeship, or a university course related to science or agriculture. It is not uncommon for students to transfer before completing their ABSA.

## Framework connection

The national training system's e-learning strategy, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework<sup>8</sup>) funds and supports [E-learning Innovations](#) projects which aim to embed e-learning into the national training system by supporting and enabling innovation in training design and delivery, at the state and territory level.

In engaging in this E-learning Innovations project, the following Framework products and resources were used:

- Industry Engagement exemplar
- NSW Farmers Federation<sup>9</sup>
- Your Guide to Social E-learning<sup>10</sup>
- Flexible Learning Toolboxes<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> <http://flexiblelearning.net.au>

<sup>9</sup> [http://industry.flexiblelearning.net.au/examples/cases/nswfa\\_bizcase.pdf](http://industry.flexiblelearning.net.au/examples/cases/nswfa_bizcase.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> <http://socialelearning.flexiblelearning.net.au>

<sup>11</sup> <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/toolboxes>

## Acknowledgement

This is a South Australian [E-learning Innovations](#) project output, developed by River Murray Training and Riverland Trade School with seed funding from the Framework.



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## For more information

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