

# **Achieving and contributing more in-life: Crossing the *Disinterested to VET qualified* boundary, nurtured by learning leaderful environments**

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**Abstract:** This paper offers an approach to supporting an adult – with life experience – in crossing the *disinterested / VET qualified* boundary. Whilst this is Australian focused, the invitation is extended to reflect upon more global extrapolation opportunities to add to economic strengthening and social cohesion.

The research derived insights – prompting further inquiry - point to there being much individual and community gain by supporting *not-yet-VET-qualified* individuals to overtly value what they know and can do – such valuing, leading them to give consideration to engaging with VET. Of course, not all will act upon the opportunity. The sequence of this boundary crossing being ‘awakening’, ‘motivating’, ‘supporting’, ‘achieving’ and ‘confirming’. And, as reviewed in this paper, the LCM Achievement Model (Hughes 2007a) – when applied as an activity system tool/artefact – has boundary crossing initiating and sustaining utility.

In essence, whilst acknowledging that there are VET systemic inhibitors to be addressed, such as uninhibited access to recognition of prior learning and tuition cost to the student, the inherent goals and principles of VET in Australia invite being pro-active in motivating boundary crossing where a disinterested posture would otherwise exist. With this in mind, it should be noted that ‘disinterested’ may be either ignorance or active rejection grounded.

**Keywords:** Ethnography, Activity Theory, Lifelong Learning, Capability, Leaderful, Social Capital, Productivity, Vocational Education and Training

## **About the author:**

From a background of mathematics and science teaching and then diverse enterprise management and consultancy, Dr Lewis Hughes is the Director of Enviro-sys – a consultancy focused upon broadly defined sustainability through making the best use of knowledge. Consequently, his research interest is largely directed at issues associated with lifelong learning and the yield to the individual, community and organisation. Lewis is also an Honorary Fellow of Deakin University, Australia.

## **Introduction - Why cross the disinterested to VET qualified boundary?**

Some adults are unaware that vocational education and training (VET) is a pathway, for them, to expanded achievement in life. Others are aware but reluctant – e.g. due to past negative experience with formal learning. Accordingly, this paper offers an approach to proactively support these people in crossing the boundary – to their individual and to community benefit.

Following from the logic that vocational competency is a core element in workplace productivity and the outcomes of the Hughes and Hughes (2011, 2012, 2013) exploration of VET – when well taught – contributing to social capital, this paper is grounded in the proposition that –

*Strength of engagement with vocational education and training (VET) is a significant brick in the foundation of economic and community productivity.*

Further, this proposition has much resonance with the view of Svendsen and Svendsen (2004, p.2) that not acknowledging the influence of social capital is the missing link in the productivity debate.

For us – Libby<sup>1</sup> and Lewis Hughes – the productivity resonance arises from our experience and research findings that adult engagement with Australian VET can be life-changing. In particular, this occurs when an adult student comes to VET with reticence regarding academic capacity and/or low level motivation and/or felt exclusion from engaging with formal learning at tertiary level. For some, Australian VET is a second chance at achieving employment related qualification and building social capital attributes such as pride-in self, commitment to making the most of what they know and can do, having appropriate trust in-self and trust in others, contributing to workplace and community cohesion, and being a lifelong learner.

Beyond just local gain, there is global advantage in acting to engage *the disinterested* in VET as is appropriate to individual and community needs and opportunities. In this respect, and configured as is appropriate to national norms, the entwining of education and training – as is the VET potential<sup>2</sup> – is a pathway to expanding an otherwise disadvantaged individual's sense of self and life horizons; and, thus, strengthening the community locally and globally. Accordingly, this paper offers strategic planning elements supporting VET boundary crossing.

## Research approach

The informing research outcomes have been acquired through ethnographic inquiry and data viewed through the prism of activity theory. Whilst much of the insights are a consequence of inference from scoping inquiry, the amalgam of these outcomes gives authority to the productivity proposition set out in the introduction.

The research, and like inquiry, drawn upon includes VET recognition of prior learning for volunteers (Hughes 2007b), workplace training support of VET programmes (Hughes 2003), relationship of lifelong learning to organisational achievement (Hughes 2007a), men 45+ years requiring a new career (Hughes 2008), and VET & Social Capital (Hughes & Hughes 2011, 2012, 2013).

## Background to Action – The notion of a *learning leaderful* environment

The explorations informing this paper weren't seeking boundary crossing insights; however, there is a thread of relevant insights. The relevance points to the supporting role of formal and informal leaders, valuing the outcomes of lifelong learning, in *learning leaderful* environments – see Figure 1.

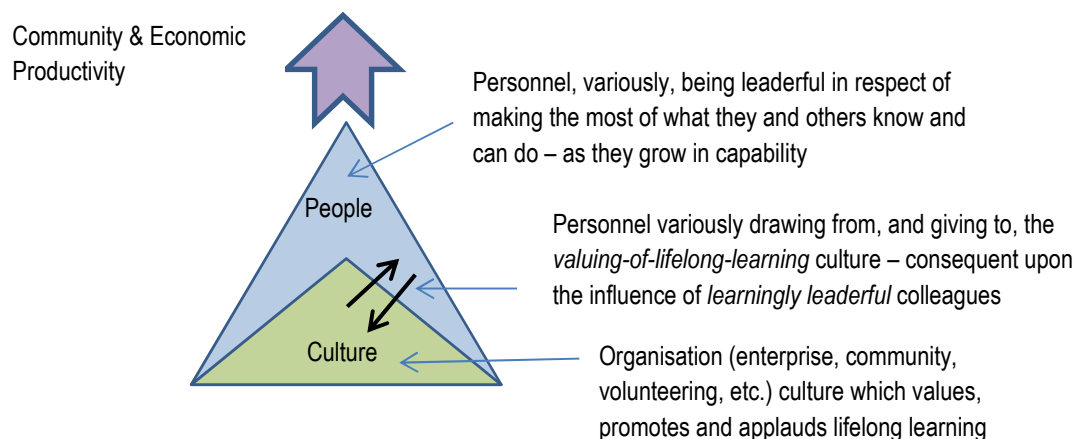


Figure 1: *Learning Leaderful Environment*

Importantly, there is the potential for *learning leaderful* environments to abide in the workplace, the family, the community, VET providers, etc. Accordingly, this paper posits that there is

<sup>1</sup> Libby Hughes passed away in February 2015. However, this paper is a continuance of her legacy in respect of individual and community gain accruing from lifelong learning; and the role of VET in this.

<sup>2</sup> The erosion (where it occurs) of the “E” in VET is cause for concern.

much gain in acting to cause such environments to be sustained in our local and global society; and the pathway to VET has much to offer.

In introducing the notion of *learning leaderful* environments, I extrapolate from Raelin (2003) advocating distributed leadership giving rise to leaderful organisations. Accordingly, my meaning of a *learning leaderful* environment is one in which formal and informal leadership contribute to a culture of valuing the outcomes of lifelong learning; and, where appropriate, otherwise VET disinterested people are motivated to act upon VET opportunities.

Further, an inherently *learning leaderful* environment is good practice in business, community and close relationships. This was the case in my 2002-2005 exploration of the relationship between valuing lifelong learning and retaining Country Fire Authority of Victoria (CFA) volunteers.

For the CFA, and at a time of volunteer resignations seemingly associated with the requirement that they participate in more formal training<sup>3</sup>, distributed leadership valuing learning adding to self-esteem was found to be the foundation upon which volunteer retention rests; and this led to the development of the LCM Achievement Model (Hughes 2007a) as a device for pursuing organisational achievement – see Figure 2. Subsequent exploration of the broad efficacy of the model, has led to advocating an *engagement with learning* process of *awakening, motivating, supporting, achieving and confirming* – confirming, being overt applauding of achievement.

In this instance of boundary crossing, the application of the LCM Achievement Model begins with defining the sweet spot as “*The disinterested moving to engage with VET and intending to achieve qualification*”. It is then a matter of –

- acting to heighten the valuing of learning outcomes as are brought to the boundary and then enhanced in crossing the boundary – the ‘L’;
- acting to nurture a culture which supports the boundary crossing – the ‘C’; and
- acting to appropriately value, and enhance the motivations which variously apply – the ‘M’.

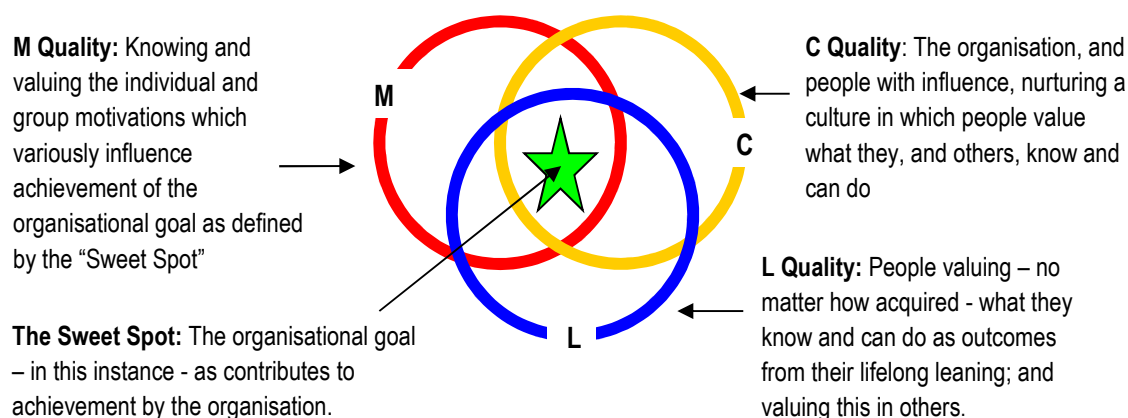


Figure 2: LCM Achievement Model (Hughes 2007a) – A generic representation

In justification of the generic relevance of the LCM Achievement Model, in addition to the large focus upon the CFA, the emergence of the model was partially informed by investigation into water operations, contract cleaning and waste management.

On reflection, the LCM Achievement Model was foreshadowed in earlier life experiences such as skills transfer within a water, wastewater and electric power upgrading project. This project was directed at sustainability of a remote Indigenous community.

<sup>3</sup> Following the deaths of a volunteer fire fighting crew, training was more formalised. This was seen as threatening by some (e.g. exposure of language, literacy and numeracy weakness) and/or under-valuing of their experience by others.

In the course of the community infrastructure project there were a number of instances where members of the work team were *awakened* and acted to reach beyond hitherto personnel horizons. This was under the influence of a site engineer with what I now identify as *learning leaderful* qualities – nurturing a mutually respecting learning partnership. The valuing-of-learning partnership was characterised by *motivating, supporting, achieving and confirming* and had (with the benefit of hindsight) the LCM Achievement Model elements at its core.

As for the remote community, the stories of people who have come to VET with much success under the influence/support of others are indicators of much to be gained by the individual and the community. Whilst these influencing/supporting people may not have regarded themselves as being *learningly leaderful*, they had acted in this way.

Being *learningly leaderful*, invites innovation. For example, research into the recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a way to express valuing their volunteers (Hughes 2007b) prompts consideration of cultures being *learning leaderful* in a wide range of workplaces, and the like.

Whilst the presence of *learning leaderful* influences in the workplace and community have much potential to bring people to VET, this quality within VET is highly influential in going on to qualification as exemplified below.

- Thomas (pseudonym), a truck driver who injured his back (to the point that he now can't sit still for more than 30 minutes) had to find alternative work. Social work was suggested to Thomas, but he was initially reticent about this as a new career and was reluctant to undertake study. However, Thomas came under the influence of a VET teacher who nurtured both learning passion and was influential in him so embracing his new career that he now views hurting his back as fortuitous – he is now doing what he should have always been doing. (informing, Hughes 2008)
- Mary (pseudonym) was enrolled in VET as a consequence of the contract cleaner employer taking advantage of a government wage subsidy for employees classified as trainees. Consequent upon a fear of school, Mary was a reluctant enrollee in a VET Certificate II in Asset Management (cleaning operations). However, notwithstanding the questionable employer motives, the *learning leaderful* (in nature) VET experience did cause Mary to acquire enthusiasm for learning, her husband and children were proud of her achievement, and she went on to further VET study. (informing, Hughes 2003)

The VET teachers in the foregoing examples are what Libby and I have come to identify as *educationalists* in our exploration of VET and Social Capital (Hughes & Hughes 2011, 2012, 2013). Also, there is coupling between the VET teacher being *educationalist* and the VET environment being *learning leaderful* - as evidenced in exploring the wide efficacy of the LCM Achievement Model which has mostly been directed at VET issues.

### **Action – Initiating and/or supporting the boundary crossing**

Agents – of some form – are required to move a potential VET student from *disinterested* to *engaged* and on to *qualification*. In the absence of initial internal agency/motivation within the potential student, external influence is required; and creating and sustaining *learning leaderful* environments across the community is helpful in this regard.

In addition to the requirement for influential authority to take the lead in putting in place an environment which is *learning leaderful* in nature, there is a requirement for three categories of agencies (actors) with *learning leaderful* agency –

- those who influence approaching the boundary;
- those who assist in crossing the boundary; and
- those who support going on to achieve the qualification.

Of course, the central actor is the person potentially and then engaging with VET. Drawing upon the Hughes and Hughes (2011, 2012, 2013), I suggest that the first and second of the three points of agency are coupled, and there can be coupling between the second and third. Accordingly, Figure 3 illustrates positioning the LCM Achievement Model as a tool/artefact in an activity system with the potential student as the subject. This said, Figure 2 is a framework for strategy development and tactical activity to bring about crossing the boundary – going on to qualification is a next step requiring redefining of activity system elements.

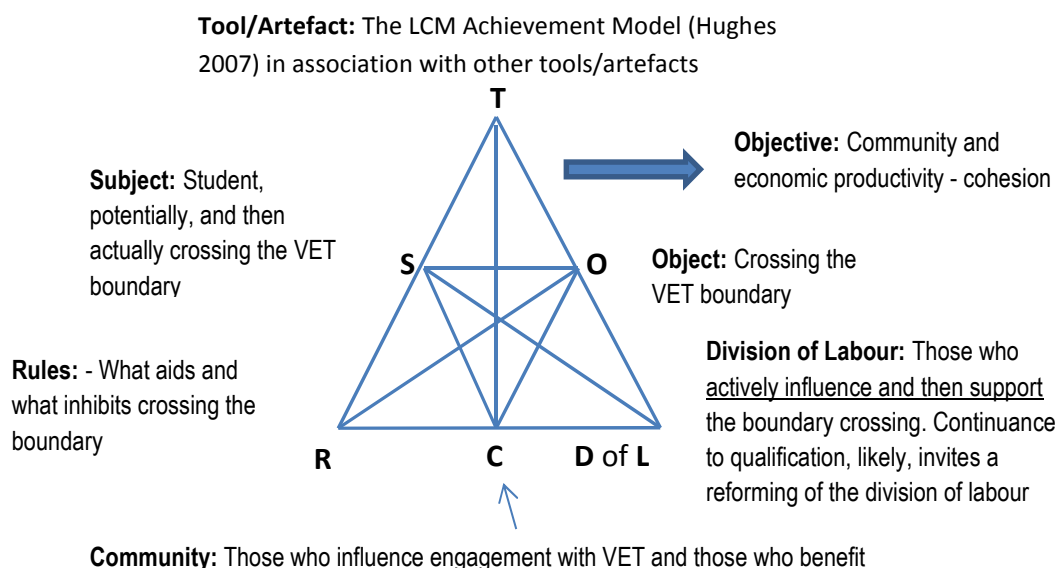


Figure 3: Activity system as supports ‘disinterested to VET engaged’ boundary crossing – potential student as the subject

The Figure 3 representation of an activity system does not exist in isolation to interacting activity systems. For example, an activity system where educationalist teachers are the subject – as would be the case in going on to qualification - is but one of many potential interacting activity systems. Accordingly, in acting to support the boundary crossing, the interests and activity of these others must be valued and integrated into arising strategies.

With respect to interacting activity systems, the outcome of research yielding the LCM Achievement Model foreshadowed an approach of engaging stakeholders in conversation so as to agree a common object and with a view to identifying which of the ‘Rules’, ‘Community’ or ‘Division of Labour’ is most pivotal to achieving the intended objective. In this approach, the bridging conversation is more important than the actual decision (Refer Hughes 2015 – forthcoming).

In Figure 3, the ‘what’ is encapsulated in identifying the subject and setting the object, the ‘environment’ (in this case *learning leaderful*) is shaped by rules, community and division of labour, and the LCM Achievement Model (probably in association) is the ‘tool’. In essence, an activity system approach informs strategy and the LCM Achievement Model guides action.

### **Conclusion – Productivity benefit to the individual and to society**

In sharing this undercurrent of outcome from a range of enquiry, I look beyond those who are readily identified as being at risk such as culturally marginalised, long-term unemployed and those feeling excluded from society. The not-so-obvious include those who through injury or other change in personal circumstances must find new direction in life, those who feel under-valued as a consequence of gender and/or socio-economic circumstance, and those who sense that they could achieve more but are uncertain regarding getting started. Also, there are those who are not aware of

their potential, but upon being *awakened* will reach beyond current horizons. No matter what the incoming status, the quest is for a strengthened and productive society.

With the quest in mind, the foregoing is offered to assist in installing *learning leaderful* environments; and is a foreshadowing of continuing enquiry – noting that the act of enquiry has the potential to prompt action.

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