The National Customs Brokers Course: An E-Learning Model

Roberto Bergami

Institute for Community Ethnicity and Policy Alternatives, Victoria University, Australia

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Abstract

The liberalization of Australia’s economy began in the 1980’s by the abolition of protectionist trade barriers. Changes to tariff barriers and duty rates had a significant impact on international trade facilitation service providers, such as licenced customs brokers. In Australia, to operate as a customs broker, an individual must firstly complete a course of study prescribed under the Australian Customs Act 1901, and additionally pass a national examination. This paper discusses the introduction of a revised national customs brokers course, and in particular, the development of an e-learning method of delivery by a private education provider. The main benefits and possible shortfalls of the specific e-learning approach pursued are outlined, together with a summary of feedback from students across a number of units of study. The paper concludes that the e-learning approach offered through this course of study may assist in the development of communities of practice, thereby potentially offering additional benefits to those available through traditional classroom based studies.

Keywords: Customs studies, on-line delivery, e-learning, access of education, communities of practice

1. Introduction

As an island continent, Australia has traditionally been relatively disease free – an aspect that provides comparative advantages in international trade transactions. To assist in capitalizing and maintaining such disease free status, international trade transactions are subject to border control measures that are the toughest in the world. Each international consignment attracts the scrutiny of the Australian Customs Service (ACS) and additionally, as relevant, the attention of permit issuing agencies, such as the Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service. Changes to border control legislation in the past five years, designed to phase in a new customs cargo reporting system, significantly changed the role and scope of the customs brokerage operations, and importantly imposed a compliance regime unforgiving of errors.

This new customs control environment integrated international border control and security measures based on the risk management principles of electronic data capture recommended by the International Convention on the Simplification and Harmonization of Customs Procedures (revised Kyoto Convention) 1999.

These border control reforms, that affected the operations of other permit issuing authorities, impacted on the educational arena, causing changes to the relevant course of study,
including the possibility of on-line teaching and learning options, as discussed in the next section.

This paper is practically focused and outlines the development of a new on-line learning delivery mode (provided by a private registered training organization). The on-line course is considered in the context of a community of practice, and its membership identified. The community of practice theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is a useful model of learning that will be used in this paper to explain the various links and relationships that are formed within this student-centred, e-learning environment – the design of which engenders the development of knowledge and skills, and consequently, capacity building.

Although traditional classroom based courses are referred to in the paper, the intention is neither to compare the different modes of delivery (classroom based versus on-line), nor is this paper aiming to provide a comparison between different educational providers, rather, this paper reviews teaching and learning in the on-line environment.

Would-be educational providers may benefit from the description and the discussion of the implementation of the on-line course. The approach described in this paper may be an appropriate generic model that could be applied across different disciplines. In the context of career and staff development opportunities, this paper may provide useful insights about alternative learning options.

2. Australian customs brokers course

To become a licensed customs broker in Australia, an individual must satisfy the requirements of the Customs Act (1901), Section 183 CC (2) (1) (a) “… if, and only if, … he has completed a course of study approved under subsection (5)”. Under Subsection (5) the CEO of the ACS has power to approve, in writing, such a course. The key issue for any student pursuing studies in this course is the ability to attempt the national exam and, if successful, thereby gain a customs brokers licence.

The approved course of study is offered as competency based Vocational Education and Training (VET), through Technical and Further Education Institutes (TAFE) and private Registered Training Organisations (RTO). Units of study are developed through a government controlled National Training Package (NTP) system that mandates learning elements and performance criteria, leaving it to providers to develop their own instructional materials. Instruction may be classroom based, by correspondence (distance learning), on-line, or any combination of these.

In 2006, through Australian Customs Notice 2006/12, the ACS announced the approval of the National Customs Brokers Course (NCBC), comprising eleven units of competency. The NCBC is the pre-requisite for the national exam, successful completion of which leads to the issue of a customs brokers licence.

The Customs Brokers and Forwarders Council of Australia (CBFCA), the peak industry body for border control clearance functions that operates as a not-for-profit organization, is currently the only RTO offering this course on-line. Although TAFE also offers the NCBC it is only available as classroom based studies, and is limited to Melbourne and Sydney urban areas due to critical mass requirement for viability. The implication of the different study mode options are discussed in the next section.

3. Major differences between TAFE and the CBFCA

The most notable differences between the two providers are:

3.1 Course fees

The TAFE course enjoys government subsidies with capped maximum annual fees. A
TAFE course typically costs AUD 1,500.00 to complete. The CBFCA course attracts a much higher fee, estimated to be about AUD 5,000.00.

3.2 Instructional method of delivery

TAFE offers only a classroom based course, whereas the CBFCA exclusively offers its course on-line, via the International Trade and Logistics College (ITALC), its training arm. In this paper the abbreviation CBFCA and ITALC are used synonymously. The CBFCA pursued an innovative approach with its on-line course, mindful of the training needs of the future, as “Australia’s VET system faces a significant training challenge in the next ten years. E-learning is part of the solution … being a cost-effective means of providing consistent flexible and engaging training” (The Industry Engagement Project for the Flexible Learning Advisory Group, 2006).

On-line teaching has both advantages and disadvantages, including:

Main Advantages
- Education being offered to remote and rural areas as “online learning offers the prospect of direct delivery … to groups traditionally excluded from institutional learning” (Stephenson, 2001);
- Flexible participation, as the e-learning environment allows access anytime from anywhere with “improved chances to participate in learning activities… but while staying at home” (Collis and Moonen, 2001);
- Learning resources to students are available at any time;
- The place of instruction is virtual, therefore travel to and from the venue is eliminated;
- Open virtual access to facilitators; and
  On-line interactive software can be used for formative assessment.

Main Disadvantages
- Technical problems with hardware and software that may hamper access and contribution for the learner and facilitator alike;
- e-learning environment and unfamiliarity of applications – this may apply to both the learner and the facilitator and it is likely to be only of concern in the beginning (but this may contribute to participatory reluctance, especially for the learner);
- Failing to progress through learning tasks and/or falling behind on workloads; and
- “Hiding” during on-line sessions by being a passive “silent participant” (this may be easier in larger groups and applies to both on-line and other environments).

These points will be discussed later in the paper when considering the teaching and learning approach adopted in the on-line course.

3.3 Selection of students and opportunities for a community of practice

TAFE students are routinely accepted on application, whereas the CBFCA pursues a more selective approach. Mr. Bill Murphy, National Training and Professional Development Manager of the CBFCA, claims that the rigor of the course necessitates students having access to resources, and being exposed to the customs brokerage environment, in order to successfully complete the requisite regular research and problem based learning tasks. As students are in situ, employers are more likely to support their study program, and indeed, the majority of employers actually sponsor their staff to undertake the course.

It is argued here that the environment of the on-line course contributes to the development of a community of practice (COP), as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991) – that is, as a group of individuals who share a common interest in their activities within a community, allowing for participation at various levels, but requiring a degree of commitment and
behaving in a mutually respectful and trusting manner (Mittendorf et al., 2006). COP are regarded by some as “the major building blocks in creating, sharing, and applying organisational knowledge” (Lesser and Prusak, in Lesser et al., 2000).

The concept of the ITALC-NCBC COP is shown in Figure 1. The student, central to the COP concept receives assistance by the membership this community. This COP comprises:

- ITALC – the educational provider;
- Facilitators, with primary teaching and learning roles;
- Employers, who may provide financial and resources assistance, and can therefore make a substantial contribution to the COP as “organisations can do a lot to create an environment in which they (communities) can prosper, valuing the learning they do, making time and other resources available for their work, encouraging participation, and removing barriers” (Wenger et al., 2002);
- Peers, who, as part of their learning process may enhance each other’s learning – for example, sharing prior knowledge and past experiences, or forming study groups as a means of collective learning;
- Border control government agencies, who have information available and may assist with a student’s progress in dealing with problem based tasks; and
- Colleagues, in either formal or informal mentoring roles to assist the students’ learning.

![Figure 1: ITALC-NCBC community of practice concept.](image)

As the customs brokerage community is small, the COP may provide a useful means for the student to establish longer terms links with the membership defined above. This is particularly beneficial to persons who live in areas outside Melbourne and Sydney urban centers.

The ITALC-NCBC COP enhances student learning and contributes to an individual’s national exam-readiness status. As stated before, successful completion of the exam enables the granting of a customs brokers licence, the ultimate goal of this process.
3.4 Assessment approach

In Australia, the VET sector operates a competency based system that deems a student to be either Competent (C) or Not Yet Competent (NYC) on completion of each assessment task, based on a universally applied grading system, with no opportunity for differential treatment on a course-by-course basis. An organization offering a VET program may determine its own parameters for C or NYC. Within TAFE, a pass equals a grading of 50%. However, the national examination for customs brokers carries a minimum pass rate of 70%. Aware of this situation, the CBFCA took the decision to set their minimum pass rate of 80%, reflecting a hurdle rate higher than that of the national examination. The philosophy behind this decision was based on logic – if students are educated at a higher level than the national examination, then their chances of success should be enhanced. If the students are educated below that level, then logic would suggest that their pass rates may be comparatively lower. In this sense, the CBFCA aimed to have good outcomes from its national exam candidates. Examination results for the national exam are not publicly released, but individual providers have access to pass/fail rates on their students. Comments on these data are limited because, these only provide anecdotal evidence. Because of privacy laws in Australia, there is no publicly available mechanism for tracking student progress through TAFE/RTO, and/or plot success versus failure rates in cases where an individual has attempted the national examination on more than one occasion. Therefore, the only available measure that has been disseminated is a simple ratio of pass/fail between TAFE and RTO. Currently, the only available information is an aggregate of pass rate for each TAFE and CBFCA cohort over the five national examinations held between 2007 and 2009. It appears that the national examination rate for TAFE students stands at 24%, whereas the CBFCA students record a 68% success rate. Based on these data, the CBFCA students appear to be nearly three times more likely to pass the national examinations than their TAFE counterparts. Although this is a significant difference, it is not possible to provide a definite reason for this difference. Whilst it may desirable to think that the higher pass rate is a direct result of the 80% higher hurdle rate imposed by the CBFCA, this may not be the only causative factor. Student selection, access to resources, different instruction methods, and instructional materials, may all be other contributing factors. In an attempt to overcome the limitations of the national examination data, discussion of CBFCA student surveys data is provided later in the paper.

The development and implementation of the on-line course is discussed in the next section.

4. Developing and implementing the on-line course

The CBFCA, through ITALC, began delivery of the on-line NCBC from mid 2005. ITALC simultaneously contracted content experts to write the instructional materials; IT experts to technically develop a teaching and learning and course administration base; and a consulting VET auditor to ensure compliance with government requirements applicable to VET providers.

Ultimately, in matching design to educational requirements ITALC had to “…devises the activities, ...anticipate how learners might approach a discovery learning exercise, and ensure that the structure of that experience is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the alternatives. They also have to decide how the learner will be directed and supported, and in what way and to what extent the orchestrator might be in control, and therefore managing, the learning. Too much freedom creates insecurity in the learner and inhibits learning; too little frustrates the learner” (Shaw, 2001, p. 177).

These issues are respectively discussed below under the headings of: Systems of
administration and teaching, Units content, Facilitation and On-line teaching and learning.

4.1 Systems of administration and teaching

ITALC evaluated a number of commercially available student administration systems, but decided these did not meet its requirements. Consequently, ITALC outsourced the development and implementation of a proprietary web based system for student administration and on-line assessment, together with an internal communication (private email system) facility. This system was designed primarily to be “student-friendly”, easy to navigate, without too much “clutter” on its web pages. Discussions of technical aspects of the system are not within the scope of this paper.

A commercially available product was chosen to conduct the on-line teaching activities, as the ITALC platform was never intended to be used for interactive learning. The identity of the product has been purposefully suppressed by the author in the belief that this information is not a critical component of the discussion in this paper. The product chosen by ITALC does not incorporate a student administration system, although this product has 3D capabilities, such as webcam, live web links, etc. However, the usage of these is at the discretion of the individual facilitator. The teaching program allows for synchronous operation and provides a number of useful components for the on-line classroom applications, such as microphone access, text messaging to selected individuals or the whole group, desktop sharing application, file transfer options and whiteboard authoring.

Other communication enhancements comprise “raised hand” icon to attract attention, “smiling face” or “applause” signaling agreement or satisfaction, and “frowning face” or “thumbs down” to signal the opposite. These are useful icons to assist with the management of classroom time and interactions. Further technical discussion on this program is outside the scope of this paper.

4.2 Units content

ITALC selected and commissioned expert practitioners to write the instructional material for each unit of study. Once produced this material was subject to a peer review process, before being finalized, to ensure the content was accurate, up-to-date and relevant. The instructional material developers’ brief included writing technical information and a variety of learning activities for interactive use in the virtual ITALC system. Among the problem based activities designed to check the students’ comprehension of the instructional material were drag-and-drop word exercises, noughts and crosses, crossword puzzles and, additionally, the students would be challenged with “complete the documents” exercises simulating workplace practices.

The CBFCA was seeking to develop a course where a “deeper, more conceptual level of understanding is desired, … one where the emphasis is on activities and resources, and their use to discover, experience, reflect, practice, discuss and explain” (Shaw, 2001, p. 176).

The development of instructional material certainly created links between ITALC and the writers, but expanded these links to include the facilitators and the peer reviewers, as well as border control agencies whose resources may be incorporated into the instructional material. These links are examples of a COP “in action”, through the participation of multiple members who contribute various perspectives to create this learning environment.

4.3 E-facilitation

ITALC chose facilitators based on core technical skills and teaching background. Whereas core technical skills would be evidenced by the facilitator’s experience and expertise within the industry sector, qualifications are based on different criteria. A facilitator may only
conduct classes independently if they hold a minimum teaching qualification approved under the VET system, and where they do not, classroom tuition may only be given under the supervision of an appropriately qualified VET teacher. The majority of facilitators selected by ITALC had suitable teaching qualifications, and those who did not, were sponsored by ITALC to attain this within twelve months of being engaged to teach on-line. Prior to the start of on-line classes, facilitators were taken through a comprehensive induction program on the use of the administration and teaching systems and software.

4.4 Teaching and learning on-line

The on-line course comprised two teaching and learning methods, each applied on alternate weeks.

One approach was a one hour Virtual Classroom (VC). This is a synchronous on-line classroom, where students may contribute, as a part of a group, to specific problem based situations. The typical VC begins with a three minute quiz where students answer three multiple choice questions related to the week’s topic. Responses are used by the facilitator to ask more questions from the students to elicit further discussion. The facilitator then usually has a very short presentation, following which, students receive a problem based question to solve during virtual class time. Students are virtually shifted into a separate classroom commonly referred to as Break Out Rooms (BOR), to collectively solve the problem. Each BOR provides the students with what is essentially a replica of the main classrooms functionalities, that is, full microphone access, text messaging, whiteboard access and authoring rights. A spokesperson is appointed to debrief other teams of their solution. Students return to the main room at the appropriate time. Each whiteboard is saved and displayed in the main room during the teams’ debriefing sessions. Students have the opportunity to question other teams’ solutions, thereby generating peer-to-peer discussion on the problem at hand.

The other approach is the use of Discussion Board (DB) in the alternate week. Students are provided with problem based questions having a single correct answer, but possibly a number of approaches to solving the problem. The opportunity for differential approaches is an “important aspect of fostering peer interaction and feedback, peer reflection, debate, discussion, and peer-to-peer assistance in solving the problem” (Bonk et al., 2001, p. 78). Students disseminate their ideas via the discussion board and this should generate, in theory, peer-to-peer discussion on the topic. The facilitator’s role in the discussion is one of guidance, without providing the answer. For example, assistance may be provided by way of suggesting places where students may find additional information to help them solve the problems. Contributions to solving the problems typically increase as the discussion gathers momentum during the course of the week, and the different contributions should lead to an increase in the cohort’s collective knowledge.

The on-line course cannot be evaluated against national examination results, due to lack of available data. However, ITALC have distributed student surveys, and this may provide an alternative evaluation approach. As the surveys were designed and distributed by ITALC to its students, and are subject to commercial-in-confidence considerations, it should be noted that only limited data was released for this paper. Consequently, the discussion on the survey responses, as provided in the next section, is necessarily limited to the available data at the time of writing this paper.

5. Student feedback on the on-line NCBC

ITALC routinely surveys students to gauge course satisfaction, and also as part of their internal continuous improvement cycle. For the purposes of this paper, the results of surveys
from two units of study for the second year of the program “Quarantine Procedures” (QPR) – (Semester two 2007 and Semester two 2008), and Customs Clearance Practices (CCP) – (Semester one 2007 and Semester one 2008) are discussed. The reasons for providing information about the units mentioned above, is because they are delivered towards the end of the course, and by this stage, students have become quite familiar with the on-line teaching and learning environment, and administration software. Consequently, the responses from these cohorts are presumed to more accurately reflect student sentiment about the quality of the educational services, and teaching and learning support.

Comments against each of the questions are summarised below. It should be noted that as the available data is limited, opportunity for in-depth analysis is likewise limited.

**Question 1: The unit learning material covered the content as described in the unit description.**

This question highlights the links among some of the COP members in relation to the design of the instructional and assessment materials. VET competencies are devised as a result of a collaborative process with key stakeholders, identified in Figure 1, including educational bodies, industry and government representatives, employers and facilitators and content writers. Lave and Wenger (1991) COP theory is therefore useful in understanding how these groups make a varied contribution, at different levels and according to their interest and expertise, in the development of competencies that form the basis for the learning materials and assessment tasks.

![Figure 2. Question 1 response summary.](image)

From the data across four surveys, the summary of which is shown at Figure 2, there was only a 5% response in the Disagree category for CCP in Semester one 2007. Neutral
responses (Neither Agree or Disagree) were recorded for CCP in both Semester one 2007 (5%) and Semester one 2008 (16.7%). Although the response rate for the neutral category increased comparatively for CCP between 2007 and 2008, the overall combined positive response rate remains high, at above 80%. The responses related to QPR are even more positive, with no responses in either the neutral or negative categories. Overall, these are exceptionally high positive responses, reflecting the close alignment of the materials to unit of study. This is an important aspect for any would-be educational providers, as the alignment of contents and descriptors signals a holistic approach to the course structure and design and should, therefore, contribute positively to the student learning experience. Cohesion is an important element for the development and sustainment of a COP.

**Question 2: The weekly downloadable materials explained concepts clearly.**

The downloadable materials are an important aspect of the student’s learning resources. As the students are not part of face-to-face education, the downloadable materials assume increased importance for the off-campus learner, particularly if they are in a remote location. As these resources are used for self-paced and self-directed learning, in preparation for a subsequent class, they must be written and presented in such a way as to make it easy for the student to grasp new concepts. Clarity of expression, ease of reading, logical flow and coherence are essential qualities of these materials, if they are to be a useful resource for the student. These considerations should be paramount for anyone wishing to develop on-line instructional material.

The aggregate positive responses rate (Strongly Agree/Agree) remains above 80%, except for CCP in Semester one 2007 at 65%. However, a more positive overall shift was recorded at 83% in 2008. Part of the improvement in this response rate may be attributable to the provision of revised learning resources as part of the ongoing ITALC continuous improvement activities.
Question 3: The learning interactions (e.g. crosswords, quizzes, etc.) provided suitable activities to allow me to assess my progress.

Shaw (2001) argues that the design of the resources, and their use, is critical to student learning in an on-line environment, however, students are nevertheless expected to manage their learning under these circumstances. The interactive exercises are used by students to gauge their progress, and seek the assistance of the facilitator where difficulties or problems arise. The interactive activities were designed to provide a degree of variety for the student, acting as a “draw factor” in creating and maintaining interest in the subject matter. An “action” environment is likely to lead to a better student experience. Any on-line educational provider should be particularly mindful of the “boredom” aspect of bland instructional resources that lack appeal, as the student cohort is likely to be comparatively less motivated in their application.

![Figure 4. Question 3 response summary.](image)

With the exception of CCP for Semester one, 2007, all aggregate positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) are above 80%. It appears from Figure 4, that there was a significant improvement in CCP between 2007 and 2008, with the elimination of Disagree responses and a reduction in neutral responses, contributing towards the increased positive response. For QPR, neutral responses were 11.7% in Semester two, 2007, with no negative responses. In Semester two, 2008, negative responses of 16.7% were recorded, but there were no neutral responses. The aggregate positive responses therefore decreased marginally from 88.3% in 2007 to 83.3% in 2008, however, as this is not a significant change, this not considered to be immediate cause for concern.

Question 4: The Virtual Classroom sessions for this unit were helpful in understanding the unit content.

Virtual Classrooms are essentially an on-line tutorial, where students aim to solve
problems within specified times. The COP theory is helpful in understanding the value of the interactions among peers that, whilst in the Break-Out Rooms, attempt to collectively arrive at an agreed solution to the problem at hand. Consistent with the COP theory, individuals typically make contributions at varying levels of participation in this environment.

![Figure 5. Question 4 response summary.](image)

For QPR there was a positive shift between 2007 and 2008, with the disappearance of the Strongly Disagree response. However, the neutral responses increased from 5.9% to 16.7% for the same period; and the combined positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) weakened slightly from 88.3% to 83.3%. It is not possible identify the reasons for these shifts, and it may well be simply a reflection of response variations between the different groups. For CCP, between 2007 and 2008, there was a reduction in the neutral responses from 30% to 16.7% with a commensurate increase in the combined positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) from 70% to 83.3%. These positive responses appear to support the notion, that in the virtual environment, on-line interaction remains an important activity and virtual classrooms appear to be popular among the student cohorts, with one student suggesting that the course should “have more VC’s throughout the term”.

**Question 5: The discussion board sessions for this unit were helpful in understanding the unit content.**

One student stated that for them, “discussion boards were most helpful”. It has been argued that, when interacting with students on a professional level, a teacher’s behaviour can be a great source of influence for individual learners, and that furthermore, student efforts reflect the expectations of the teacher, as “students do better when they feel that teachers believe that they can be high achievers” (Mallinen, 2001, p. 146).
These comments may be particularly suitable to discussion board activities, where peer-to-peer participation is vital to discussion developing within the student cohort. Facilitators must develop the necessary skills to avoid intervening and interfering with student debate, yet provide helpful guidance. Aspects of the COP theory may be noticed in discussion board activities in a number of ways. For example, peer-to-peer interactions may produce information useful to a student in meeting the challenge of the problem to be solved; or the student may seek access to employer or government authorities’ resources. Mutual engagement takes place under such circumstances in an informal manner, without rules or boundaries, and to the degree that COP members are able and willing to assist – all essential elements of the COP theory as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991).

Responses to this question show a degree of dissatisfaction with the discussion board activities. As Figure 6 shows, for QPR, although the negative responses were eliminated, between 2007 and 2008, there was still a clear shift from Strongly Agree to neutral. For CCP the opposite occurred. In 2007, the aggregate positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) were 65%, with 25% neutral and 5% respectively in the negative (Disagree and Strongly Disagree) categories. In 2008, the responses had shifted to be 100% aggregate positives. The reason for this shift was attributed to the choice of topics for discussion board activities, and this may also reflect individual cohort preferences in the responses. That is, what may be effective for one group may elicit a different result for another. The discussion board does present some problems for ITALC, as participation rates are considerably lower than those of virtual classroom attendance. However, discussion boards have the potential to greatly contribute to collective learning, and are of particular importance in the formation of peer-to-peer collective learning as, “in the context of our isolated distance learning student, the most salient community of practice is the wider group of learners with whom the current student wishes to identify” (Mayes, 2001, p. 24). Discussion boards are also useful to students in other ways, as one comment indicates:
“Even when I didn’t contribute often the discussion board provided quite a good study tool - especially pre assessment to revise”.

**Question 6: The learning in this unit was relevant to my workplace.**

The COP theory may be useful in the context of instructional materials and their application to the workplace. Given that this material was developed by members of the COP for the benefit of one of its key stakeholders – the student, it is important to learn the usefulness of such materials in field applications, that is, “on the job”. Furthermore, the VET system places a high degree of importance on studies being linked to current industrial practices.

![Figure 7. Question 6 response summary.](image)

On the basis of the responses received, it appears that there is a high correlation between what is learnt in the course and the students’ jobs. As can be observed from Figure 7, over 80% of all responses are in the aggregate positive (Very Well/Well) categories. This indicates a strong correlation between learning outcomes and current workplace activities of the students, and as one QPR student realized: “I finally understood that this unit is vital in a Customs Broker’s work”.

**Question 7: The assistance from my facilitator was very good.**

Facilitators are key resources in any educational environment, and even more so for geographically isolated students because, “although learning is a student’s individual’s growth process, there is evidence that teachers can make a difference” (Mallinen, 2001, p. 148). This author points out the high degree of influence that a teacher can exert over individuals, and that student efforts often reflect the expectations a teacher may have of them as “students do better when they feel that teachers believe that they can be high achievers” (p. 146).
As can be noticed from Figure 8, in the case of QPR, the aggregate positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) account for a remarkable 100% satisfaction rate. In the case of CCP, the responses were not as high, but a definite improvement between 2007 and 2008 responses may be observed. Strongly Disagree and neutral responses were not recorded in 2008, and whilst there was an increase in the disagree category, this was more than offset by an increase in the aggregate positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree). The improvement may have been due to ITALC introducing minimum response “standards” for the benefit of both facilitators and students. For example, responses to requests for assistance by the next working day – this allows the facilitator time to respond, whilst at the same time the student knows that a response may not be immediate, and this is particularly relevant when dealing across different time zones.

**Question 8: My facilitator answered my emails in a timely fashion.**

This is an important question because of the possibility that the student may be able to “hide” in the on-line environment and, consequently, feel isolated, unrecognized and/or undervalued. For geographically remote students, rapid responses to requests for assistance may be of greater importance, as this group of students has less opportunity to physically meet with peers. Whereas students in urban areas may agree to form study groups, etc., geographically remote students simply do not have these options, because of the tyranny of distance, consequently, for non-urban students the link to learning is very much based on virtual interactions.
Responses to this question for both QPR and CCP show marked improvements between 2007 and 2008 data, as is evident from Figure 9, so much so that for both units, the aggregate positive (Strongly Agree/Agree) responses indicate a 100% satisfaction rate in 2008. From a student’s point of view, prompt feedback is an important element of the learning process, and particularly so in an on-line environment, where the feeling of isolation is an ever present consideration. It would seem that the introduction of minimum standards has produced a significant improvement, and this is an important consideration for any would-be educational provider.

**Question 9:** The content of the assessment related very well to the study completed for the unit.

This question was designed to check the alignment between the teaching and learning and the assessment, from the students’ perspective. Assessment strategies are an important aspect of any unit of study and these must align to the unit of study and the overall course objectives.
As can be observed from Figure 10, there was an exceptionally high correlation reported by the respondents for both QPR and CCP. For QPR, there was only a neutral response of 5.9% in 2007, but in 2008 the aggregate positive (Strongly Agree/Agree) responses accounted for 100%. For CCP, the level of improved was markedly higher. In 2007, the aggregate positive scores were only 60%, with 15% neutral and 25% in aggregate negative (Disagree/Strongly Disagree). However, the 2008 data shows no negative or neutral responses, and consequently the aggregate positive responses (Strongly Agree/Agree) account for 100%.

Changes made to the unit’s instructional materials, and closer scrutiny to the alignment between teaching and learning and assessment, as part of ITALC’s continuous improvement cycle, certainly appear to have had the desired effect in these units, at least from the students’ perspective.

In summary, it may be observed that student responses provide an overwhelmingly positive overall view of the course, with generally low levels of dissatisfaction on any particular issue. It appears that whatever little criticism was reported, ITALC acted upon it. It also appears that this has contributed towards a general trend of more positive responses in later surveys. The discussion boards remains an area of concern, with lesser participation rates than those ITALC desired. Although the clear reason for this phenomenon is unclear at present, further investigation and a different approach to the discussion board is warranted, as continuing student engagement is required not only during virtual classrooms, but also during periods when virtual classrooms are not offered.
6. Conclusion

The CFBCA influenced the structure of customs brokers studies by introducing two innovative concepts. One was the move away from a structured qualification towards select competencies designed to meet specific industry needs for skills and knowledge. The other was the introduction of a new e-learning option for would-be customs brokers.

The theories of the COP are useful in understanding the teaching and learning that is created in the on-line environment in a number of ways, including how the membership helps to define and identify the COP, and how these members provide, to varying degrees, and at multiple levels, support for the activities of the COP, as after all, COP “play a critical role as the building blocks for creating, sharing, and applying organisational knowledge” (Lesser and Prusak, 2000, p. 123).

In a COP, participation varies according to its membership. As an example, not unexpectedly, facilitators and students have high interaction rates, whereas government agencies may make a less active contribution, and employers may make a different contribution (workplace resources and financial assistance) – and these differences in contribution are both recognized and supported by the arguments put forward by Lave and Wenger (1991). The COP theory also helps to understand how a loosely formed environment can develop and survive and contribute to student learning, through predominantly informal, yet powerful, arrangements, such as peer-to-peer interactions and “unofficial coaching” by colleagues and former students.

Based on student survey responses discussed above, it appears that the CBFCA have successfully implemented their on-line course. The framework, structure and management of this course may provide a useful template for other educational organizations, whether public or private, to follow in the future.

Student feedback was generally highly positive. The one area that warrants further improvement is that of the discussion boards. ITALC clearly needs to monitor this aspect and perhaps introduce different ways of encouraging contributions. Grading contributions in a transparent manner, such as with the use of a rubric, may encourage more activity, as the rewards would be obvious – the greater the amount and quality of postings, the higher the grade achieved for the task. A synchronous discussion board may also be considered, however, in practice this may prove difficult because of the different time zones and staggered implementation of daylight saving hours. As an example, at times there are differences of four hours between one area of the country and another.

Although the on-line course has been in operation for three years, it is difficult to make conclusive claims, as the data that has been released by the CBFCA is limited in scope and depth. However, the general trends evident through the student survey responses warrant further enquiry. For example, future investigation, subject to permission for data collection, could focus on student success and completion rates, and richer data could also be gathered through a more robust survey mechanism and semi-structured interviews with students and other stakeholders from the on-line community of practice.

Reference