Research Article

TALKING THE TALK: DEVELOPING A STUDENT CENTERED APPROACH FOR TEACHING COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR OPERATIONAL POLICING

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The increasingly complex police-citizen situations in which the novice police officer may be placed demand that police training environments continually assess their education programs to ensure that such programs are contemporary and meet the expectations of stakeholders. One challenge facing recruit training is the need to prepare the novice police officer to communicate effectively in often stressful and complicated situations. Police educators must develop learning strategies which provide opportunity for students to build their capacity to be effective communicators through autonomous, student-centered learning experiences. The communications teaching and learning opportunities within the Associate Degree in Policing Practice for New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) recruits is no exception. This paper discusses the changes that have occurred to the delivery of communication training to NSWPF recruits over the past 15 years. It considers the merits of incorporating authentic teaching strategies and learner assessment processes into the delivery of communication education and of creating experiential learning experiences that support autonomous, self-regulated learners. In particular, it discusses the use of role plays (verbal communication trials) to provide a unique and authentic learning experience for students and to assess their verbal and non-verbal communication skills in a simulated policing environment.

Keywords: Experienced-based education, authentic learning, police education, communication skills, reflective practice

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INTRODUCTION

C ommunication skills are a central focus of NSW Police Force recruit training, permeating all aspects of the Associate Degree in Policing Practice course that New South Wales Police Force recruits must undertake to become police officers. This paper discusses the evolution of communication training at the NSW Police Force Academy in the context of the teaching strategies used, learner assessment processes and progress towards providing students with experiential learning experiences that support autonomous, self-regulated learners (Kolb, 1984). In particular, it discusses the use of role plays as a form of student-assessment, delivered through an assessment exercise called Verbal Communication Trials (VCTs), and with the aim of providing a unique and authentic learning experience for students and to assess their verbal and non-verbal communication skills in a simulated policing environment.

The potential dangers in failing to teach police students effective communication skills is evidenced by police-citizen interactions which have resulted in injury and at times tragic outcomes. Communication is an integral component of police-citizen relationships, with poor communication likely to reduce public confidence and trust in local police, whereas, public confidence and trust can be enhanced simply by the police engaging as an active, visible and accessible part of community life (Rix, Faye, Maquire, & Morton, 2009; Bradford, Stanko & Jackson, 2009; Jackson & Sunshine, 2007; Skogan, 2006; Tyler & Fagan, 2006).

The importance of communication training and associated assessment of student capabilities in effective police communication should not be under estimated (Bodkin, 2012; Erickson, Cheatham & Haggard, 2009). The challenge for police educators is to develop learning strategies which provide opportunity for students to build their capacity to be effective communicators and this paper argues that these skills are best learned through autonomous, student-centered learning experiences.

The increasingly complex police-citizen situations in which the novice police officer may be placed demands that police training environments continually assess their education programs to ensure such programs are contemporary and meet the expectations of stakeholders. The communications teaching and learning opportunities within the Associate Degree in Policing Practice for New South Wales Police Force (NSWPF) recruits is no exception.

Communication training has long been an important component of police recruit training, so when the NSW Police Force partnered with Charles Sturt University to develop a Diploma of Policing Practice for recruits in 1998 it was apt that the subject JST112 Communication in Policing was included. In 2003, a review of the Diploma led to the introduction of the Associate Degree in Policing Practice, which included the subject PPP113 Communication in Policing.

A redesign of the curriculum in 2013 retained the communication subject, integrating the subject's core learning content and approaches into the delivery of all subjects across the curriculum. In 2009, the VCTs were introduced to the PPP113 subject in order to address a gap in the students' learning experiences related to the use of verbal communication skills in simulated policing situations. The VCTs were carried over into the new curriculum on the basis of the consistent positive feedback received about the efficacy of the exercise from both teachers and students.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNICATION IN POLICE EDUCATION

There is universal agreement among law enforcement agencies that one of the most important skills for a police officer is effective interpersonal communication (McDermott & Hulse, 2012; Fitch & Means, 2009; Ceniceros, 2003). The collective challenge for police educators globally is the development of effective communication education and assessment programs which both prepare and sustain officers in the course of their policing duties.

The critical nexus lies between the pedagogical approach applied in teaching communication skills and the capacity for such an approach to provide learning experiences which lay the foundations on which the student is able to independently build and sustain these skills for and in the reality of policing the streets. Such an approach is consistent with the teaching and learning strategy of the Associate Degree in Policing Practice course. The course curriculum has a strong emphasis on experiential learning and the use of policing scenarios to give context to learning and a focus on student-centered approaches in the classroom (Charles Sturt University, 2014).

Police education has long been criticised for its teacher-centered focus and failing to promote critical thinking and the problem-solving skills police require in their operation roles however an increasing shift among police educators to a learner-centered approach is encouraging deeper learning and a higher level of cognitive engagement among policing students (Shipton, 2009). O'Neill and

McMahon (2005, p.29) describe student-centered learning as giving students a choice in their education, enabling students to be active learners who do more work in the class than the lecturer does, and as a shift in the power relationship between the student and the teacher. The concept of student-centered learning has been credited in education scholarship from as early as 1905 but it was not until the 1980s that student-centered learning began to gain broad acceptance as an alternative to teacher-centric practices in adult learning environments as part of a paradigm shift away from teaching to learning (O'Neill & McMahon, 2005). This paradigm shift has been reflected in the changes to the ADPP curriculum and delivery, as well as NSW Police Force recruit training more generally.

Communication is discussed and applied in all subjects studied by NSWPF recruits, including weapons and appointments training, but the inclusion of a formal communication subject in the first three months of recruit training gives focus to key written communication skills, such as report writing and essay writing, and to verbal communication skills demonstrated through in-class role plays. A further opportunity for the application of communication skills is offered to students through their participation in simulated police practice exercises. The simulated police exercises in the subject PPP111 Simulated Policing Acquiring Confidence focus on the application of law and police procedure with communication skills being a contributor to the overall capacity of the student to demonstrate confidence.

Assessors in PPP111 consider the communication ability of recruits in simulated policing situations however limited weighting is attributed to communication skills in the formative assessment. This is premised on the underlying rationale that the communication skills education and assessment resided in the teaching and assessment for the Communications in Policing subject. Changes to the curriculum in 2013 have sought to better integrate communication into the delivery of all aspects of the ADPP, including the police practical subject formally known as PPP111.

Prior to the introduction in 2009 of the Verbal Communication Trials (VCTs), there was a disconnection in the pedagogical approach to communication skills education within the NSWPF recruit program. Within the program there did not exist opportunity for students to participate in an exercise for learning and assessment that centered exclusively on their verbal communication skills. Such skills are of key importance in a police officer's duties (see Erickson, Cheatham & Haggard, 2009; Cornett-De Vito & McGlone,

2000).   Individual VCTs exercises were designed for incorporation with the PPP113 Communication in Police Subject and more recently introduced on a permanent basis in the new ADPP curriculum for the following reasons:

- to teach effective verbal communication skills;

- to provide best practice learning opportunities to develop such communication skills;

- to incorporate verbal communication assessment exercises to support student-centered learning; and

- to contribute to the transfer of learning between theory-based subjects such as PPP113 and practical subjects such as PPP111.

The use of the word trial reflected the experimental status of the VCT exercise and the need for evaluation prior to permanent inclusion in the program.

VCT DESIGN PRINCIPLES

The VCTs developed for the PPP113 subject require the student to participate individually in role play scenarios based on real time and realistic police-citizen interactions. In recent years, role playing has become a frequently used tool in law enforcement education and training (Van Hasselt, Romano & Vecchi, 2008). Role playing has a firm foundation in education for its benefits in allowing students to practice what they have learned, to provide a basis for discussion, contribute to developing emotional intelligence, promote group work and generate student enthusiasm and interest (DeNeve & Heppner, 1997). It is particularly valuable in police education as recruits often only have limited personal experiences and may rely on media depictions of policing to draw upon when reflecting and applying police practice and law.

> A key element to experience-based learning is that learners analyse their experience by reflecting, evaluating and reconstructing it (sometimes individually, sometimes collectively, sometimes both) in order to draw meaning from it in the light of prior experience (Andreson, Boud & Cohen, p225).

The design of the VCTs draws on the work of Knowles (1990, p.61) who suggests adults "learn new knowledge, understandings, skills, values and attitudes most effectively when they are presented in the context of application to real-life situations". Further design principles for the development of the VCTs

encapsulate the fundamental concepts of situated and authentic learning as espoused by Eiseman (2001, p.1) which suggest:

> … situated learning advocates a greater recognition of the importance of context in learning, arguing that learning embedded in relevant context, provides both motivation for learning, and in particular heightened learning outcomes. Of particular focus in situated learning is learning for the acquisition and development of the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for professional practice.

Important also to the design parameters of the VCTs was the perspective of Jonassen (1994, p. 223) who in discussing the meaning of authentic, commented:

> ... most educators believe that "authentic" means that learners should engage in activities which present the same type of cognitive challenges as those in the real world (Honebein, Duffy, & Fishman, 1993; Savery & Duffy, 1996), that is, tasks which replicate the particular activity structures of a context.

Similarly, Bennell and Jones (2004, p. 21) suggest that military research indicates that students retain 90 per cent of learning when the process engages them in realistic practice of required skills. Functional principles implemented into the VCT design included the need to design tasks that reflect the complexity of the policing environment, to design a learning environment that supports and challenges the learner's thinking, and to provide opportunity for reflection on the content learned and the learning process (Savery & Duffy, 2001).

While recognising the potential for situated and authentic learning experiences in the context of the VCTs, one of the key design tasks for these exercises was to enable assessment of participants to be conducted. The challenge for educational design in developing learning opportunities which are not only contextualised to resemble real world application and which also have the capacity to provide for authentic assessment activities was identified in the work of Wiggins (1989).   Wiggins suggests that pivotal to the creation of common ground between the learning and assessment context and real world application is the authentic nature of the context in which the learning and assessment is situated, "the tasks are either replicas of or analogous to the kinds of problems faced by adult citizens and consumers or professionals in the field" (1989, p. 229).

An important criterion for the VCTs was premised on creating an activity which would encourage a student-centered approach to learning delivery. The rationale for this design approach was founded on providing opportunity for students to become independent learners with the knowledge to critically reflect on their work in a process of adjusting and modifying their approach to tasks and activities. The experiential learning approach advocated by Kolb (1984) provides a pedagogical construct in which students experience an activity, reflect on the activity, interpret and generalise to the context of their learning, apply their understanding and adjust and/or modify their approach and reapply, thus the learning is continually evolving and renewing. Figure 1 represents Kolb's Adult Experiential Learning Cycle.
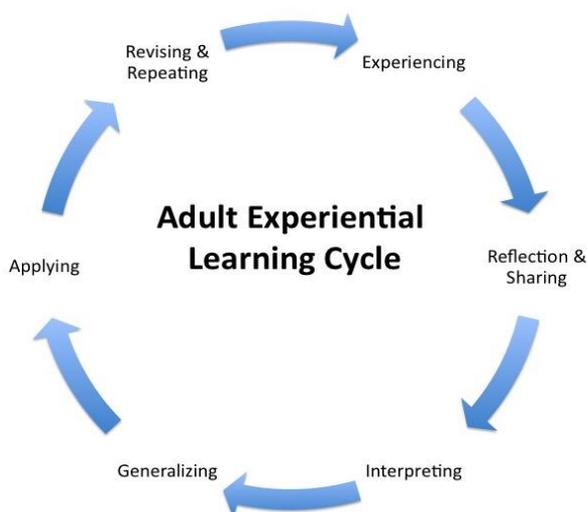

Figure 1 — Kolb's Adult Experiential Learning Cycle

While the literature indicates that an effective learning environment is that which situates the learning in authentic contexts, in the field of law enforcement education, it is often neither practical nor desirable to replicate completely authentic police-citizen interactions. A key attribute of the VCT design is its focus on verbal communication interactions without the requirement to replicate the complexity of the fidelity characteristics which would more closely resemble the real world policing environment. For example, VCT role plays are structured to avoid the need for the recruit to use weapons and appointments, while the use of any force by the recruit in the carefully designed scenarios is often evidence of ineffective communication in the circumstances.

The VCTs draw on a model which has previously been utilised by the United Kingdom National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA) in their police recruitment process. The NPIA model centers on assessment of applicants ability to demonstrate problem solving skills, together with critical thinking and incorporates assessment of personality traits, for example, discrimination and racism. The NPIA model required applicants to attend a room and before entering they are provided with information relating to a scenario involving a member of the public; the applicants take up the role of an employee tasked with resolving the issue at hand. A point of difference with the VCTs is that while the NPIA model is utilised in the police recruitment process, the applicants are not tasked with taking on a police role in the scenario. VCTs are a good example of practice-based education as opposed to the NPIA's use of the exercise to assess the suitability of potential recruits.

Practice-based learning and assessment models in non-police education fields have also provided guidance in the development of the VCTs. The medical education field, for example, utilises a similar model to the NPIA where learning and assessment are situated in role plays. The commonly recognised label for the medical role plays are OSCE's (Objective Structured Clinical Examinations) and they form an integral component of learning experiences for medical students and ultimately assessment of their learning. Similarly to the NPIA process, the University of Wollongong (UOW) employs OSCE modelled assessment processes during their selection of medical studies candidates.

Prospective medical students are directed to a room and provided with a scenario involving a member of the public with a medical related complaint or situation. The scenario requires the candidate to demonstrate critical thinking and problem solving abilities. The student assessment in the role plays is one component of their overall application and assessment for candidature. These examples support the claim that the design of the VCTs is based on well-established models of learning and assessment.

The point of difference which sets the VCTs design apart is their utilisation as an assessment and learning experience for police students specifically based on demonstration of verbal communication skills. This predominantly includes the management of conflict and the effective use of active listening, rapport building, empathy and assertiveness, which are reflected in the assessment rubric (see Figure 2). Assessment of critical thinking and problem solving within a

police context remains situated in the practical subject PPP111 Simulated Policing Acquiring Confidence.

VCTS IMPLEMENTATION

The VCTs were initially introduced as a non-assessable learning exercise in the latter stages of the PPP113 subject, building on the learning development and experiences gained by recruits in the first 11 weeks of their training. In the exercise, students are tasked with attending a location (generally a small room) where they are provided with a printed sheet containing information relating to the scenario. The student is given one minute to read the instructions, simulating the limited information provided in a call from police radio to a general duties police officer in the field.

The student enters the room where they immediately encounter a role player and an assessor seated to the side. It has been identified that the use of fellow recruits as the role players in the PPP111 scenarios limited the realism of the activity because the recruits did not have the experience of similar events to draw upon. In order to add realism to the VCT scenario, an experienced police officer or trainer in plain clothes is used as the role player. As recruits enter the room they are confronted by a role player affected by a combination of factors, which might include anger, intoxication, mental illness and anxiety. At the conclusion of the role play, the tutor and the experienced role player provide feedback to the student on their performance and encourage discussion from the student on their performance. Additionally, students are then provided with a performance reflection form to complete.

Students are provided with a debriefing document with questions as prompts to guide reflection on their VCT experience. A key role for the performance reflection process is to develop student skills in relation to reflection on performance. Such reflection is seen as being valuable within their studies and in the performance of their policing duties.

The positive anecdotal evidence from the student experience with the VCTs was encouraging. The central themes that evolved were:

- students valued the contribution to their learning and development from the opportunity to individually demonstrate their verbal communication skills;

- students indicated their experience in the VCTs provided valuable feedback on their learning progress and where deficient, suggestions as to how to adjust/modify their skills; and

- students indicated their learning was enhanced through the opportunity to demonstrate their skills without the distraction of other class members observing the performance.

Of equal importance in the process of trialing the inclusion of the VCTs as a subject-based activity was the perspective from the tutors/assessors involved in the trial. Here also the evidence was anecdotal and reinforced the feedback received from the participating students. The feedback from the tutors revealed the following:

- the VCTs offered opportunity to provide individualised feedback on performance;

- the VCTs offered opportunity to assess the participant's verbal communication skills without the distraction of other class members observing;

- the VCTs offered opportunity to assess the participant's verbal communication skills without the distraction of assessing police procedural tasks; and

- the VCTs offered opportunity to work collaboratively with the participants to develop their reflective practice.

In 2012, the VCTs changed from being a non-assessable to an assessable item with the PPP113 subject, replacing one of two existing written assessments to give balance to the topic assessments. This modification does not appear to have affected the positive views held by students and tutors regarding the value of the learning experience derived from participation in the VCTs. The trialling of the VCTs as an assessable exercise within the communication subject and the resultant indications of their potential to provide valuable learning outcomes for participants precipitated formalising the VCTs as an assessment process. A key criteria considered in the development of the VCTs was to identify an assessment method that would contribute to a student centered approach to learning and assessment.

VCTS ASSESSMENT FRAMEWORK

The key features of the VCTs assessment tool which would contribute to a student centred approach to assessment were the capacity to: (1) communicate the learning outcomes and performance expectations; (2) enable focused feedback; (3) describe levels of quality of performance on a learning continuum aligned with Bloom's taxonomy of learning; and (4) provide a guide to students for self-reflection on their performance and importantly a guide for future enhanced performance.

The criterion identified for the VCTs align with the fundamental principles of rubrics designed for assessing learning. The work of Andrade and Du (2005, p.1) suggests that a rubric is a "document that articulates the expectations for an assignment by listing the criteria, or what counts, and describing levels of quality from excellent to poor". Rubrics, as discussed by Popham (1997) have three core features: Evaluation Criteria, Quality Definitions and Scoring Strategy.

These core features are widely acknowledged in the education community as the overarching parameters for rubrics, the explanation of the more precise guiding details in rubrics design is where individual interpretation in design are presented (see Glickman-Bond & Rose, 2006; Quinlan, 2006). Importantly, the literature suggests concurrence on the capacity for rubrics to establish benchmarks along a continuum which provide clarity as to the expectations for learners. This concurrence is reflected in the work of Reddy (2007) in presenting a review of the literature centered on the purpose, design and evaluation of rubrics.

In the context of the police recruit education program, where students continually scaffold their learning and demonstration of communication skills, an assessment tool which guides reflection and reapplication is paramount. Effective and appropriately designed rubrics which clearly articulate learning outcome criteria and levels of achievement/performance have the capacity to create transparency, reduce bias and support objectivity in an assessment process. Further, rubrics support learners' self-assessment and ownership of their engagement with and achievement of learning through setting the parameters for levels of quality. It is these features of the rubrics based assessment process which aligns seamlessly with the intent of the VCTs. Table 1 presents the VCTs assessment rubrics.

To date there is no formal research data attached to the evaluation of the VCTs. The anecdotal evidence provided by students and tutors suggests the rubrics are readily adopted for:

- the clarity they provide of what is required to demonstrate capability along the learning continuum;

- the student centered and driven approach to learning achievement;

- the relevance of the learning experience; and

- the evidence of satisfactory or unsatisfactory learning achievement.

Within the ADPP, several iterations of the VCT assessment rubrics have been implemented as the program has progressed. Refinement of both the VCT scenarios and the assessment rubrics is anticipated to be an evolving process as they are developed to embrace best practice educational pedagogy. Tutors assigned to the teaching of communications skills and implementation of the VCTs and the rubrics assessment indicate that the process provides a transparent platform from which to provide student feedback and guidance for performance enhancement. Situating the assessment rubrics as a component of the overall VCT experience aligns with the experiential learning construct advocated by Kolb (1984). The VCTs take up the role of the 'experience' upon which the learner reflects, modifies behaviour and reattempts in the cyclic process.

The curriculum delivery design for the ADPP has been remodelled in preparation for commencement in 2014 and the VCTs remain an integral component of the program. Following an evaluation and modification of the ADPP assessment model, the VCTs will be a non-assessable exercise included in a week of practice-based activities in the final week of the police recruits first three months of training. Further empirical evaluation of the VCTs is needed to establish its worth as an educational exercise although the anecdotal evidence provided by tutors and students strongly supports its continued inclusion in an integrated and practice-based police recruit training course.

Further empirical evaluation of the VCTs is now planned to establish their specific value in transitioning police students from the classroom to their field of operation. This paper acknowledges the work of teaching staff on the ADPP who have contributed to the development of the VCTs and the accompanying assessment rubrics.

PPP113 COMMUNICATIONS IN POLICING – VCT ASSESSMENT SHEET

Total Score: /70

Student: No: Class:

SATISFACTORY (See Score Criteria)	UNSATISFACTORY (See Score Criteria)	Score	Comment on verbal and non verbal behaviours/skills/characteristics
Score: 6 (Satisfactory) 7 (Above Average) 8 (High Level) 9-10 (Outstanding)	Score: 0 (Not attempted) 1 – 5 (Poor)		Verbal: choice of words, jargon, age/gender/cultural appropriate words
Student MUST be able to be understood AND comprehend communication to gain a satisfactory score			Non verbal: eye contact, paralanguage, posture, facial expressions, hand gestures, position, etc.

1. Introductions and rapport building Seeks some common ground and may use disclosure (only if appropriate) and explains reasons for interaction (IPE) Appears to acknowledge and respond to any communication barriers or noise (internal or external) No prejudice or stereotyping evident	No introductions or explanation for interaction (IPE) Uses unprofessional language – acts superior, is overbearing, rude and/or disrespectful Fails to recognise and respond to barriers or noise Allows prejudice/stereotypes to negatively impact situation *Struggles to comprehend and/or verbally communicate effectively*		PLEASE JUSTIFY YOUR DECISION WITH RELEVANT COMMENTS AND/OR HIGHLIGHTING OF ASSESSMENT INDICATORS (Consider if the student's overall behaviour was consistent with the Oath of Office and the professional and ethical standards expected by the NSW Police Force)
2. Active/critical listening Attending: good eye contact, head nods, appropriate gestures/posture and facial expressions Avoids unnecessary interruptions Hears and acknowledges the emotion behind the words Provides feedback – paraphrases/mirrors/repeats	Poor or no listening, marginal listening or evaluative listening Forms inferences, opinions or assumptions instead of listening to and establishing the facts Regularly or inappropriately interrupts Poor feedback *Struggles to comprehend and/or verbally communicate effectively*		
3. Empathy – provides reassurance and support Verbal and non verbal communication is consistent Effective use of eye contact, posture and facial expressions Good use of paralanguage (tone, pitch, speed and volume)	Displays apathy or is overly sympathetic Inappropriate eye contact, posture and/or facial expressions/poor paralanguage *Struggles to comprehend and/or verbally communicate effectively*		
4. Questioning skills Uses open questions and appropriate closed questions (eg. **TED** – tell me what happened, explain what happened and describe what happened) Uses questions to maintain control of the encounter Establishes what has happened	Uses irrelevant, inappropriate closed and/or leading questions Allows the other person to dominate the encounter Appears lost and confused as to what to do *Verbal communication difficult to understand*		
5. Assertiveness ^Focuses upon what is relevant, establishes their goal and what is not negotiable, sticks to their bottom line (repeats if necessary), and treats others with appropriate respect ^ The assertiveness and conflict indicators are only suggestions. Please do not be limited to them. The main issue is whether the student handled the conflict well, irrespective of the means – please comment.	Tending towards being passive (timid or unsure) or aggressive (inappropriate yelling, manipulation, threats or use of force). Does not control ego. Becomes argumentative and/or unreasonable, 'buys in' to irrelevant issues Fails to stick to bottom line *Struggles to comprehend and/or verbally communicate effectively*		
6. Conflict resolution skills Deflects verbal abuse (eg. uses BUT as deflector) ^Some indicators: asks person to comply, sets the context and explains why, provides some options and explains consequences of non compliance, confirms action and then takes action (is able to justify action taken) Takes a safe position Actions relate to relevant law, policy and procedure	Fails to respond to conflict Fails to ignore verbal abuse (within reason) Inappropriately withdraws, accommodates, compromises or threatens the use of force Uses unprofessional/inflammatory language Actions are inappropriate, disproportionate and/or unlawful (provides no justification for action) Takes dangerous position *Struggles to comprehend and/or verbally communicate effectively*		
7. Resolution and disengagement Uses correct law, policy and procedure Makes appropriate decision and uses clear, succinct and relevant language to explain action Appropriate disengagement for situation Leaves contact details and explains any future action	Takes inappropriate or unlawful course of action Unsatisfactory resolution and/or explanation of action Due to overall poor communication leaves person feeling angry, confused and/or resentful towards police Inappropriately fails to leave contact details *Due to poor communication, resolution is unclear*		

Additional Comments:

SCORE CRITERIA:
Unsatisfactory (1-5) – indicators not demonstrated and/or poorly attempted
Satisfactory (6) – indicators demonstrated to a basic level (may be unsatisfactory in several indicators)
Above Average (7) – indicators demonstrated to a better than satisfactory level
High Level (8) – indicators demonstrated to a highly skilled level
Outstanding (9-10) – indicators demonstrated to a superior level

Assessor Sign: Print Name: Date:

Table 1 — VCTs Assessment Rubrics

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