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Paws for Thought:
Exploring a Framework for Understanding the Mediating Role of Dogs in People's
Learning Processes in Vocational Education and Training Settings.

A qualitative study of the use of dogs as mediating artifacts
in Australian vocational education and training settings in the
Townsville region

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for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
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DECLARATION ON ETHICS

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted within the guidelines for research ethics outlined in the *National Statement on Ethics Conduct in Research Involving Humans* (1999), the *Joint NHMRC/AVCC Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (1997), the *James Cook University Policy on Experimentation Ethics. Standard Practices and Guidelines* (2001), and the *James Cook University Statement and Guidelines on Research Practice* (2001). The proposed research methodology received clearance from the James Cook University Animal Research Ethics Review Committee (approval number A1149) and Human Research Ethics Review Committee (approval number H2455).

8 April, 2011

Ash Turner

Date

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to explore and develop a framework for understanding the mediating role of dogs in people's learning processes in vocational education and training settings. Specifically, it aims to answer two questions: In what ways do people use dogs as mediating artifacts in their meaning-making processes; and what are the effects of dogs in mediating individual and group learning processes?

This study examines the lived experiences and reflections of 15 students and their teachers who interacted with three dogs during a six and a half day vocational education and training course. The course was held in a major regional centre in northern Australia by a private training provider. The research employed six data collection techniques: a pre-course questionnaire; classroom observations; a critical events technique; the repertory grid technique; post-course interviews; and the researcher's personal journal.

The results of this study suggest that there were four dichotomous dimensions of people's use of the dogs: Active—reFlective (A—F), Initiating—Responding (I—R), Material—Conceptual (M—C) and Spontaneous—Planned (S—P). These dimensions appear to resonate with three of the Big Five dimensions of personality. The Big Five dimensions of personality have been used to understand the different ways in which people learn. This suggests that people's use of the dogs as artifacts may share possible relationships with dimensions of personality and people's learning styles. Exploring these relationships suggested a previously hidden dimension of artifact use, Emotional—Logical (E—L), that may be congruent with another dimension of personality. Additionally, these dimensions appear to share dynamic relationships that may provide a deeper understanding of how people used the dogs as artifacts, by illustrating how they work and interact together. The results of this study also revealed

the functioning of individual preferences within these dimensions, which may have been moderated by a number of factors.

The results of this study suggest that the mediating role of the dogs may be understood by the way they appeared to have functioned as artifacts in three domains of the learning environment: cognitive, affective and social. In the cognitive domain the dogs may be seen to have functioned as artifacts by stimulating arousal, attention, focus and concentration through positive distraction. In the affective domain the dogs may be seen to have functioned as artifacts by: triggering positive emotional responses to arousal; stimulating feelings of enjoyment, calm, warmth and peace; and by fostering a relaxed and informal atmosphere. In the social domain the dogs may be seen to have functioned as artifacts by: serving as a social ice-breaker, providing a value-free conversation starter; and by functioning in people's perceptions of others through the use of social axioms, which may have factored in the construction of their social relationships.

This study is significant because it provides new knowledge by offering a framework for understanding the mediating role of dogs in people's learning processes. It therefore provides a map to understand in what ways dogs may be seen to function as artifacts and how this works. It also opens up ways of seeing and understanding what may occur in other settings, and provides new ways of being attentive to what happens in the classroom. The examination of the processes that take place during people's interaction with the dogs also provides new knowledge by offering a framework to understand how and why these interactions make the results reported by researchers possible. It may therefore open the way for improving animal assisted therapy and education programmes, and adapting them to situations beyond therapeutic and childhood education settings.

This study holds significance for practitioners because it provides the opportunity to broaden traditional theories of artifacts and artifact use to include animals alongside the inanimate. It may also extend established understandings of artifacts and their use in the classroom. This understanding suggests the importance for practitioners to know how to use artifacts in different ways, and to show and teach those ways to others. This study holds further significance for practitioners because it reveals insights into how teachers may bridge the teacher—student divide by balancing their traditional focus on assessable outcomes and the task environment, with students' inherently social learning processes.

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