

IT'S THE MEASURES NOT THE MEDIUM

A CASE-STUDY OF STRUCTURING FOR SUCCESS
IN AN OPEN LEARNING PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper takes as its focus an Open Learning initiative to provide university level studies in an outback community. The grant, which

supported the project described in this paper, required utilisation of strategies which were both innovative and quality-enhancing. Specifically, this project was required to demonstrate the effectiveness of computer-assisted and group-centred methods as supports for students disadvantaged by the dual impediments of geographical remoteness and adverse social and economic circumstances.

The paper describes the processes and experiences involved in developing an open learning 'cell' in an outback mining town which is experiencing severe social and economic dislocation as the consequence of depressed prices for reduced production of its mineral output. It describes the processes by which community interest and later ownership was created. It raises issues concerned with the impact of the

differential backgrounds and experiences of prospective students on the location and organisation of the facilities provided by the project. The rationale underlying the selection of the appropriate teaching-learning strategies and technologies is discussed in some detail.

In brief, the paper argues that the medium (in this case forms of CML) cannot by itself overcome educational disadvantages generated in lives lived at the geographical and social margins. Students in these social locations require and demand strategies and structures which both acknowledge their differences yet support them in their geographical and social isolation as learners.

INTRODUCTION: THE NOTION OF PLACE

The meanings people make of their lives are more than the product of their material circumstances. They are also significantly influenced by the meanings they make of their place.

It has been my evolving belief that current social theory fails to detail fully the impact of place on people's lives. Many of us actively choose to visit places (e.g. Paris, Florence, the Gold Coast); we live in places; we leave places; and we worship places (Mecca, Jerusalem). Some of these places are 'romantic', others are cultural or historical. The meanings we make vary according to our relationship with the place.

I decided I wanted to explore 'place'. Where better than Coober Pedy: an easily identifiable place where place is both multi-faceted and multi-dimensional? Coober Pedy is a geographically remote place; an ethnically-diverse place. It is a place where economic production such as mining and tourism occur. It is a place where place is as important below the ground as it is above. In both dimensions, lives are lived and material production takes place. It is a subterranean place.

Coober Pedy is a place where tourists decide to visit. It is also a place where two different Aboriginal groups have been forced to live. Place is a fusion of space and experience. It is a space or location filled with meanings and is simultaneously a source of identity (Sack 1990, Shields 1991).

GEOGRAPHICAL ISOLATION

Geographical isolation is both an experience and a process. As an experience it is embedded in the lives of individuals who are physically distant from many of the major centres and resources of society (e.g. decision-makers, politicians, art galleries and universities). As a consequence, isolated places and the people who live in them are considered marginal: to be of less value than those at the 'centre'. Despite generating massive income from the major mines located within its region, the town in which this project is located experiences services and facilities that are nowhere commensurate with the income the town and its region generates. Thus one dimension of geographical isolation is the inequities that exist in the resources that are allocated to rural and isolated areas (Evans 1989).

As a process, geographical isolation restricts choices and closes off options which are available to other more-centred lives. Schooling and education more generally actively participate in these processes of marginalising students from rural and geographically isolated areas.

For example, subject choices and their availability are frequently limited and liable to change in many non-urban secondary schools. In some cases, this is because of low student numbers. In others, it is because of the greater mobility of teachers in these schools. Whatever the reason, restricted subject choices, especially in the later years, severely restricts the choices of students in the tertiary courses they can enter: especially when resource-intensive courses such as Chemistry, Physics and Biology are prerequisites for some high status courses.

University education (at least in Australia) has traditionally been centred in cities. More recently, some degree of regionalisation has occurred. However, even this change has failed to accommodate the full needs and aspirations of people living at the geographical and social margins (DEET 1989). For many, the necessity to relocate, even to a regional centre, is an option they cannot take.

Open Learning - that is programs which bring facilities, resources and study opportunities to individual learners rather than the more traditional campus-focussed arrangements for the provision of university studies - provides an ideal opportunity to hold open options for remote and geographically isolated students rather than closing

them off.

TOWARDS COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

From the outset it became obvious that successful implementation of the project would be dependent upon positive relationships between the project and the community. Much time and effort has been spent on establishing and maintaining a sense of community involvement and ownership. These activities have included widespread publicity throughout the town (e.g. in shops, businesses as well as the local Area School and TAFE Institute), formal community meetings, informal discussions with individuals and groups, and the creation of an informal local advisory group comprising the Principals of the local school and Institute, and the Community Resource Centre librarian.

As the project developed, it became apparent that the demand for the opportunities offered by Open Learning was far wider than the normal catchment of potential students. We quickly realised that some of our potential students were 'rejects' and 'failures' of the school system. We heard stories of diverse experiences of schooling in general and teachers in particular. Some potential students were most uncomfortable with our initial decision to locate the project at the school. For these students, schools and teachers were associated with experiences of fear, oppression and distrust in their previous learning.

Our original intention to locate the project within the Open Access Centre of the Area School was based on our desire to utilise existing facilities such as electronic chalkboards, audio and video conferencing and some computing facilities. We also expected that this centre would act as a focus for Open Access - Open Learning in the town. We soon discovered that incompatibilities of systems, timetabling difficulties and the physical limitations of the building would act as a severe impediment to the project.

We therefore had two major impediments to our project: one was attitudinal and the other was logistical. Further negotiations and discussions were held between stakeholders. It was finally decided that the most appropriate location for the project would be the Community Resource Centre, which is physically part of the Area School,

but is considered to be the community's (the local council provides financial support, opening times are outside of normal school hours, and the area is generally out of bounds to school children). The Resource Centre provides support to a variety of community groups and individuals. For example, it supplies materials in the various languages of the large and diverse ethnic groups within the town. Thus our decision to locate the project within the Centre both complemented an existing community facility and broke down the resistance that some

potential students expressed concerning the original proposal to locate the project within a classroom.

There is evidence of a degree of community enthusiasm for and ownership of the project. The initial community meeting attracted 32 people and there has been continuing interest in the progress of the project within the community. One consequence of this interest has been that the 10 students who are participating feel the press of community expectations as well as their own. They have expressed some degree of responsibility for the project's success. They feel a tension between their individual goals and the expectations of the wider community. Individual learners are able to confine their successes (and failures) to themselves. This becomes more difficult as a participant of a more group-focussed and community owned project.

TEACHING-LEARNING STRUCTURES

Enrolled students range in age from 19 years to over 50. There is a spread of backgrounds across previous educational experience, family and workplace status and ethnicity. There is one Aboriginal participant and because the project is restricted to one unit (Child Development) there is an all-female enrolment. All live in or around a geographically remote town.

Considerable time, effort and financial resources have been expended creating a supportive learning environment for the project. Emphasis has been placed on team-building, group support and networking skills; using local resources and accommodating the differing needs of full-time workers, women with child care responsibilities, and one student from an outlying cattle station.

All students participated in training sessions which provided information on transition to tertiary study, team building and an overview of the study materials and requirements. They also attended sessions which introduced them to the computing system supplied by the project, and E-mail in particular. Interestingly, all students indicated that they had acquired some degree of competence in word processing prior to this session. Students were registered as users of the University's VAX. Staff involved in the project were also registered on the same system. This both enabled access from home and was also expected to make the process as accessible as possible.

Students have been provided with a computer system for use with their assignments and as a means of requesting and receiving assistance from their lecturer via electronic mail (E-mail). The purposes of this aspect of the project were:

- To provide students with E-mail access to the University so that they might interact with staff using that medium.

- To provide students with access to the University library on-line public access catalogue so that they could search for items of interest to them in their study.
- To provide students with computer hardware and software to facilitate the preparation of assignments.
- To evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness for both students and staff of the use of E-mail as a support medium.

At the time this paper was written (towards the end of the designated learning period) students have indicated a range of preferred learning styles. One student has operated completely outside the group-focussed structure of the project. She has logged on to E-mail and has used it to communicate with the Project Director once. She has indicated that her preference is to work at home on her own computer and around her family and work commitments. Ideally, the project should have provided her with a modem to enable her to access the University system through the local computer.

The majority of students have participated in the group-centred activities. They have met regularly to discuss course content and to share experiences and concerns (with a tendency towards the latter!). Off-air recordings of the supporting television program have been discussed. So too have assignments. The general consensus is that this personal support is the most significant aspect of their learning.

Students were forced to take control from the outset. The project supplied blank videotapes and the meeting space. All other arrangements were left to the students. (A back-up recording is made of the program because of the tendency for the local power supply to break down.)

We have found that students have used the computer for a limited, though important, range of purposes. The major use is as a word-processor. In fact, some students have complained that their access to the system for other purposes (e.g. accessing the library on-line facility) has been impeded on occasions by this time-consuming activity. Student have used E-mail to inform staff of delays in receipt of materials an assignments, computer problems, and concerns about the progress of other students. They have also used it to keep in touch with the staff involved. However, at best, the system has been a support to their learning. The availability of a high-speed, cheap and asynchronous communication system has enabled individual students to use it for differing purposes. However, students have indicated that a gap exists between them as learners and the technology we've supplied to support them. At this stage in their learning their preference is for more traditionally-structured forms of support to

them as learners. The wide range of information that is available via E-mail has no major attraction at this stage in their studies. Their needs are more immediate. They've expressed concerns about returning to study and writing assignments, not the need for more of different information. The support provided by the written materials with their embedded pedagogy, and the free-to-air television program which supports the subject is sufficient. What students say they require are strategies to both engage with the information provided and to transfer the knowledge being acquired in to their individual structures.

REFLECTIONS ON THE PROJECT

The basic philosophy underlying the project has been that Open Learning is a philosophy not a method of delivery. Learning, not delivery, is the central focus.

Students living at the physical and social margins require strategies and structures which enable them to break down their geographical and social isolation. Strategies that have proved successful in achieving these outcomes include:

i) Acknowledgement and celebration that students come to Open Learning for a wide range of reasons. Workshops focussed on students' previous experiences as learners. They were able to affirm that there is neither a common background to them as students nor a right way to learn.

ii) Structuring of success around the learner. Success provides the catalyst for further successful learning. Getting started is the first step towards successful learning. Therefore it is essential that students are supported as they agonise over their first assignment or their first E-mail communication.

iii) Initial support produces initial success. Success means different things for different learners. We learnt that students experienced successes (and insecurities) in widely differing ways. Encouragement and space must be provided to enable students to celebrate their successes and to reflect on their failures in ways and in contexts that they choose.

iv) Success in computer mediated learning should be measured by students' abilities to retrieve, manipulate and integrate the knowledge they are accessing, and not by the sophistication of the technology provided as a support to their learning.

We also learnt that:

i) Open Learning is best kept away from schools and teachers. For many prospective open learners they = the enemy. Some of our students labelled themselves as the 'failures' and 'rejects' of schooling, and expressed a strong preference for their return to study to be away from the memories of schools and teachers.

ii) Technology is not the solution to problems of delivery - it is one tool.

iii) Individuals use technology for different and diverse purposes. Examples of uses in this project include word processing, communication, information-seeking support of other students.

THEORETICAL REFLECTIONS

Traditionally structured curricula have been based on notions of sequence, lineality and lock-step progression through the content. They emphasise time-frames, due dates and a limited range and time for assessment. The effect of this is to set the learner in a fixed position in relation to her/his learning. One consequence is that the individual student has no power at any stage of the learning process and no ownership of its outcomes. The learner is marginal in a sense to the whole process.

This marginality is accentuated in distance education where the physical separation between teacher and learner is compounded by time-delays in the receipt of materials, return of assignments and feedback.

The project described in this paper has challenged some aspects of these traditional structures and processes. Firstly, Open Learning was conceptualised as a philosophy not a method of delivery. The philosophical assumption was that these students living at the physical and social margins required strategies and structures which would enable them to breakdown the geographical and social isolation of their lives. The project acknowledge that they came to their learning for a wide range of reasons. Open Learning - the provision of opportunities for students to learn without the usual constraints of face-to-face teaching and without the usual assumptions of common prior learning - demands teaching strategies which place the individual learner in a central position in the enterprise. It is their learning for their reasons. Success must be structured around the student. Success means

different things for different learners. When achieved and then shared and acknowledged by a group of peers it provides the catalyst for further successful learning. These very personal and powerful outcomes of success were highlighted when one student proudly announced to the group one day: 'My children are proud of me for going back to school after all these years'.

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