Can m- and e-learning support pathways for meaningful vocation in remote communities?

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- The CRC-REP has three goals:
  - To develop new ways to build resilience and strengthen regional communities and economies across remote Australia;
  - To build new enterprises and strengthen existing industries that provide jobs, livelihoods and incomes in remote areas; and
  - To improve the education and training pathways in remote areas so that people have better opportunities to participate in the range of economies that exist.

- This paper relates to the 3rd point
A word of caution

- The authors do not purport to represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander positions on the issues presented here.
Challenges and opportunities

• ‘Certainly, it is difficult to imagine how any modern society could continue to function without ICT.’ (Anderson 2010: 4)
• ‘Technology can change the rules of the game... tilting them in favour of people who want to learn, by making possible mass access at much lower costs than by traditional means’ (Leadbeater 2012:54)
• Uptake of mobile technologies in remote Australian communities is strong, even where mobile coverage is unavailable
• Digital technology
  • Is it a pathway enabler?
  • Is it an end in itself?
  • How can it be effectively integrated into vocational learning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in remote communities?
No shortage of possibilities for digital technologies in remote contexts…

- Using e-portfolios as a way of storing assessable material (Wallace 2009);
- Using multimedia recording tools for capturing evidence ready for assessment (Boyle and Wallace 2008);
- Addressing access and equity issues for English as another language and low literacy learners (Guenther and Tayler 2008);
- Supporting cultural and language maintenance activities (Verran and Christie 2007; Rea et al. 2008);
- Story-telling from community perspectives (Indigenous Communications and Events 2011);
- Documenting and protecting aspects of traditional knowledge (Christie 2005);
- Engaging learners in English literacy learning, through ‘positive self-representation’ (Kral 2010); and
- Engaging and empowering participants (Corbett et al. 2009; Singleton et al. 2009).
Remote Australia, communities and mobile coverage

Access in remote communities remains a key issue which to some extent restricts the possibilities.
The ‘pathway’ construct

- Linear, direct and causal
- Equitable accessibility
- Greater value on pathways with higher pay
- Progression to higher value pathways is possible
- Individual identity is derived from occupation

Entry points

- Compulsory education
  - Including school-based VET
- Mature aged entry

Learning pathway

Non-formal pathway
- Informal learning
- Non-formal courses
- Module completers and course non-completers
- Lower and non-certificate outcomes

VET pathway
- Apprenticeships and traineeships
- Higher certificates/diplomas
- Undergraduate and postgraduate degrees

Higher education pathway

Learning outcomes

- Disengagement from labour market
- Machinery operators and drivers
- Labourers
- Community and personal service workers
- Sales workers
- Trades and technician occupations
- Clerical and administrative workers
- Managers
- Professional occupations

Occupational outcomes $/week AWE

Increasing literacy and numeracy requirements

1162 651 649 579 1082 862 1849 1349

Increasing ICT demands and opportunities
Problems along the pathway

• For many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people the pathway construct doesn’t work
  • Different ontologies (being)
  • Different epistemologies (knowing)
  • Different axiologies (valuing)
  • Different cosmologies (explaining human existence within the past, present and future)
What this then means for digital technologies in VET for remote communities

- Firstly, we can’t assume that formal learning will be a priority for technology users, even if the uptake is strong
- It is both a teaching and learning tool and an end in itself, though it is highly context dependent
- Where it works, it does so because
  - It supports what it means to be, ‘transformed into an embodiment of one’s own ontology’ (Arbon 2008: 100-101)
  - It supports contextually relevant ways of knowledge construction
  - It provides meaningful engagement processes to support values

When Aboriginal elders are inducting their young people into their ancient knowledge traditions, they are not so much interested in teaching them the content of their knowledge, but the shared background which makes truth claims and performances possible and assessable, the practices of intuition which derive axioms from theorems, the modes of performance through which truth claims and performances can be made, and the complex ethical and aesthetic work which is done in validating and privileging some particular performances rather than others. This is largely an intuitive process rather than a logical one. It is also a social process interacting with a sentient environment… These are the contexts and processes which an Aboriginal digital environment must enter and support. (Christie et al. (2005) p. 66)
We’ve got a lot more questions than answers

- Can we reconceptualise a pathways framework that takes account of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cosmologies, ontologies, epistemologies and axiologies?
- Consequently, can we reconceptualise ‘vocation’ and ‘learning’ to better fit these philosophical frames of reference?
- How can e-learning and m-learning be embedded in teaching and learning practices and content in ways that support these frames of reference?
- Given that mobile technologies are not always accessible, where does ICT fit in communities with limited access and infrastructure?
- How can ICT be used as a research tool for exploring pathways? And what could such an approach teach us about the value, uses and issues involved in ICT facilitation of learning?
- What future possibilities do newer forms of digital technologies offer in remote contexts?
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