THE HOT TOPIC COMMUNITY: VIDEOCONFERENCING TO REDUCE THE PROFESSIONAL ISOLATION OF TEACHERS IN RURAL WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

Access to quality professional learning and the opportunity to collaborate with other educators can be limited for teachers in rural and remote areas of Western Australia. A recognised need to enhance the skills of rural teaching professionals and encourage teachers in small communities to join collegial networks was established by the members of several professional organisations. A working group consisting of representatives from the Australian College of Educators-WA (ACE-WA), the Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC), the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) and the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) provided teachers in rural areas with the opportunity to reduce professional isolation through the provision of relevant, convenient, and cost effective in-service education. Through a videoconferencing system, accessed within the Western Australian Telecentre Network and other educational organisations, the audience connected and participated with the presenter and studio based audience for two *Hot Topics Seminars* in 2008. This paper reports on the challenges and successes encountered by the working group and the findings of the research conducted throughout 2008.

Keywords: *enhancing skills, professional learning, reducing professional isolation, rural and remote teachers, ICT*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers in rural and remote areas of Western Australia are often faced with limited access to quality professional learning opportunities. A significant number of teachers are employed within the Department of Education and Training (WA), where specific programs are established that employ teachers for rural and remote teaching positions. The Remote Teaching Service encompasses 43 schools in very remote locations and employs 341 staff including administrators. Many of these remote locations provide an extremely challenging work environment and lifestyle experience. The schools are often located up to 2000km from the nearest district education office and the communities are predominantly of Aboriginal population. A rural placement is attributed to schools outside of the metropolitan area, these consist of 318 schools and employ 5259 teachers including administrators. The Catholic Education Office (CEO) and members of the Association of Independent Schools of Western Australia (AISWA) also have a significant number of schools in regional locations, and are keen to implement strategies to attract and retain teaching staff to regional locations.

Previously, a commitment to promoting a positive view of education and training in regional and remote areas has been demonstrated through the individual initiatives of Australian College of Educators-WA (ACE-WA), Rural and Remote Education Advisory Council (RREAC),

Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia (SPERA) and the School of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE). This has been done by supporting and encouraging rural communities and educators to work towards the provision of quality education and training; and by providing a framework for the sharing of concerns, issues and experiences relating to education and training. Furthermore, educational research and development has been of utmost importance to inform the practices of these associations.

2. BACKGROUND

Hot Topics was originally created in 2007 by Dr Simon Clarke (University of WA) and Alec O'Connell (University of Notre Dame), committee members of the Australian College of Educators in Western Australia. The concept involved presenting a selected range of issues by appropriate speakers with expertise in each of the areas. Speakers were invited to present a point of view and lead a discussion. A series of topical professional development seminars were designed to provide an opportunity for members and non-members to get together on a regular basis. The idea was to present topical issues that could be debated and critiqued in a comfortable and non-threatening forum. It was decided that ACE-WA would run approximately six within the first year, at a central location and provide refreshments to encourage collegiality and networking. Starting times were arranged to suit educators finishing the day's work, provide afternoon tea and an hour to engage in the topic being presented.

The first year was extremely successful, easily promoted and efficiently co-ordinated which encouraged the committee to continue the series again in 2008. The difference in 2008 was the creation of a partnership with other organisations to provide access to members and non members with regional locations (E.Blake, personal communication, August 15, 2008).

The provision of high quality, rigorous, relevant professional learning opportunities that encompass the best professional guidance and foster the building of local and statewide professional learning communities has been a common goal for all four organisations. In response to this, an informal discussion resulted in a successful partnership that provided the vehicle to deliver quality, structured, cost effective, locally accessible professional learning that addressed the identified need to provide PD in rural and remote areas.

Key personnel included the President of ACE-WA, the Director of RREAC, technical staff within SIDE, the President of SPERA and a representative from Curtin University. These key people joined together with the intent of ensuring that teachers located in rural and remote regions of Western Australia had equitable access to the Hot Topic professional learning opportunity that were provided to their colleagues in metropolitan areas. The need to be proactive in responding to the rural membership base of a number of education associations was brought about by a partnership that demonstrated a common focus on regional and remote education.

3. AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The main aim of the research was to document the vision of the partnership, the procedures undertaken to deliver professional learning at a distance and the challenges and successes encountered by the partnership.

4. METHODOLOGY

The presentation of two quality, cost effective "Hot Topics" seminars were planned for delivery via videoconferencing technology. This initiative was undertaken to address a need for professional learning and networking between educators in regional and remote locations in Western Australia. A mixed methods research approach was used to collect quantitative and qualitative data.

Quantitative data were collected through surveying participants to ascertain their perceptions of their direct experiences in participating in "real time", face-to-face video conferencing professional learning. The survey comprised two parts:

- Part A asked for demographic information;

- Part B sought information on the opportunities presented through the seminar.

From the participant surveys, the data was analysed and key themes emerged. These themes became the categories for further investigation and qualitative data were then collected by open ended questionnaires emailed to the regional co-ordinators and partnership members. The participant survey feedback and recommendations from the regional co-ordinators were analysed and used to inform and improve the delivery of the second seminar.

From the participants (n=110) in attendance at Seminar One directed at the syllabus in early childhood education practice, a total of 44 responded to the survey instrument. This indicated a response rate of 40%. It is imperative to note that 48% of respondents nominated a regional location as their current teaching region, exemplifying that the data from Seminar One were evenly reported from a rural and metropolitan context. From the participants (n=37) at Seminar Two discussing the law and education, a total of 16 responded to the survey instrument. This signifies a response rate of 43%. In relation to their current teaching region, the data from Seminar Two was recorded as 40% of survey respondents' living in a rural context.

5. FINDINGS

The key themes that emerged from the qualitative data were technology challenges, quality of professional development content, future professional development needs and networking and collegiality aspects. These findings are significant and have been previously reported (Boyd, Broadley & Terry, 2008), however the foci of this paper is to discuss the challenges and successes encountered by the partnership group.

Variation Between Seminars

Hot Topic Content

The content in Seminar One addressed the topic of "Examining early childhood practice in relation to the new K-10 syllabus". The presenters aimed to highlight the importance of safeguarding high quality practice for the youngest students in our education system and encouraged early childhood practitioners to critique whether the document was applicable to their teaching context. Seminar Two was entitled "How the Law Impinges on the Classroom" and discussed the issue of privacy and confidentiality of information in schools, with reference to some recent cases studied and how schools can implement effective legal risk management in this area.

Location of Participants

The locations involved in the videoconferencing seminars included Perth (located in Leederville in the SIDE Studio with overflow broadcast to a Workshop Room); Albany (located 409 kms from Perth); Wyndham (located 3231 kms from Perth); Esperance (located 701 kms from Perth), Manjimup (located 307 kms from Perth) and Bunbury (located 180 kms from Perth). The vast distances in Western Australia are highlighted in Figure 1.
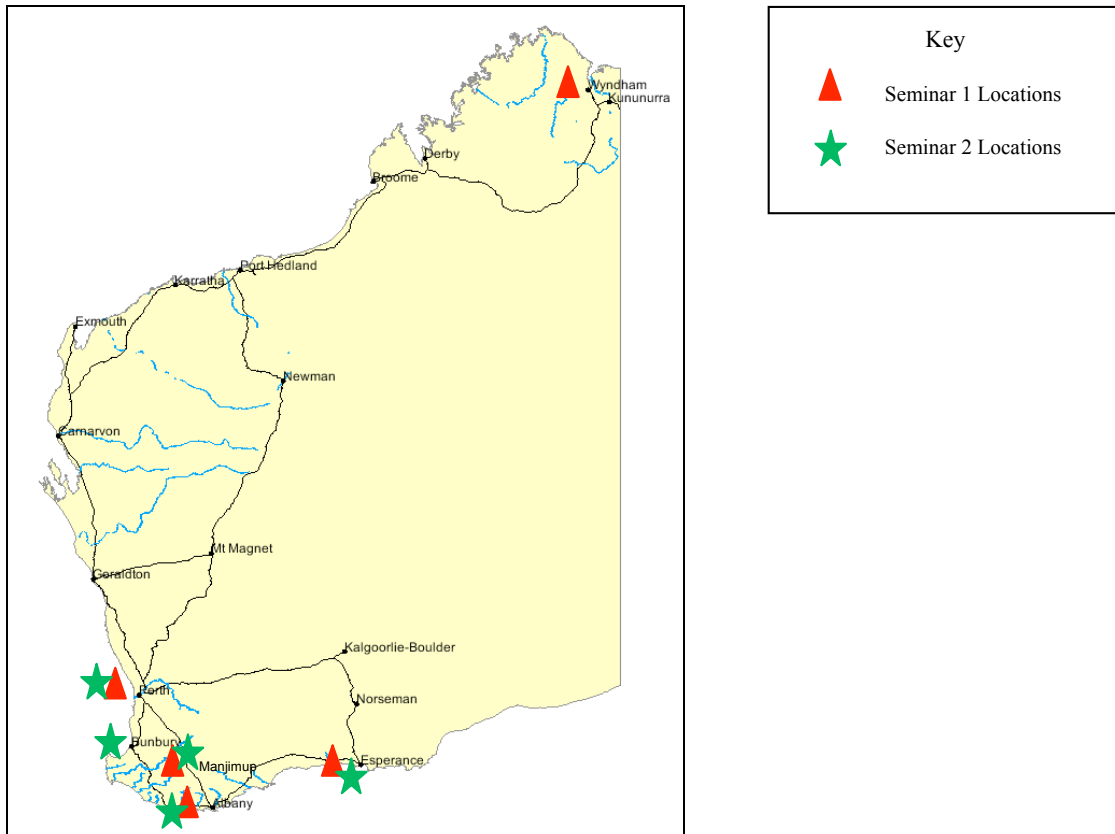

Figure 1: Map Depicting Location of Participants

The participants were educators from the areas of early childhood, primary, secondary and tertiary education. Table 1 depicts the number of participants that attended at each location for both seminars.

Table 1: Location and Number of Participants

Location	Seminar 1 Attendees	Seminar 2 Attendees
Albany	22	4
Bunbury	-	4
Esperance	15	7
Manjimup	7	-
Perth	60	22
Wyndham	6	-
TOTAL	110	37

The total number of attendees varied significantly between both seminars and can be explicitly linked to the content of the professional development opportunity. This is discussed further in the challenges section of this paper.

Videoconference Technology

ConferWest, located in West Perth, is a whole of government video conferencing bridging service that provides conference bridging services for government and not-for-profit organisations. Through the studio at SIDE, managed by WestOne and located in Leederville, a video link was established with ConferWest. The Multipoint Conference Unit (networking device) allowed multiple remote video and telephone sites to participate in the professional learning seminar via a single conference call that combined audio, data and video. The video conferencing technology is based on international ISDN and Video Over IP communication standards (Department of Treasury and Finance, n.d.). A conceptual display of the technology connections are presented in Figure 1. From Seminar One it was evident that some audio technical difficulties were encountered with videoconferencing through the studio location. In Seminar Two the working group made the decision to remove the studio from the videoconference network and position the presenter and Perth audience directly into the workshop room.
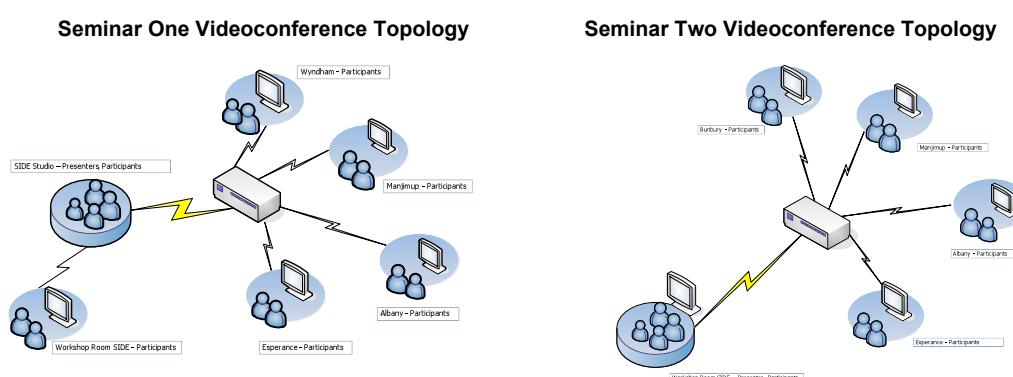

Figure 2: Different Videoconference Networking Between Seminars

6. SUCCESSES OF THE INITIATIVE

Engaging Rural and Remote Educators

Access to professional learning opportunities is of great concern to many educators living in rural and remote locations. This project enabled a very successful series of seminars to be delivered by videoconference to educators who would usually not have been able to access them. From the data at Seminar One it was found two teachers travelled to Perth from Bunbury (360km round trip), these teachers were identified as being interested in co-ordinating a session within their regional area. This became the catalyst for Bunbury to join the videoconference connection for the second seminar. Data collected from a regional location indicated that one participant in the second videoconference connection had been a member of the Australian College of Educators for 15 years and had not attended any ACE-WA professional development opportunities due to being a regional member. This data demonstrates the benefits in using technology to provide equitable access and engage rural and remote educators in professional learning with their city counterparts.

Response to Participant Feedback

The data collected from Seminar One participants' was analysed and became an integral part of the planning process for Seminar Two. The regional co-ordinators were asked to provide recommendations for further seminars and these were also used for improvement. Examples

included methods of broadcasting the event, registration of attendees, connection times and instructions for troubleshooting the videoconferencing units. The working party responded to each recommendation and ensured they were included in further planning sessions.

Initiation of Networks at the Local Level

A variety of educators working within private and government school sectors attended the seminars. Through the opportunity presented to rural educators to engage in collegial networking, a number of locations considered the notion of forming regular networking. From the data, a participant in the Warren-Blackwood Education district wrote: "Regular ECE network meetings - one a term- were agreed upon at our meeting with a different school hosting each term. A positive outcome." Similarly a participant from Albany Education district stated: "Good opportunity, I thought I might start an ECE network after this, it was a good opportunity to get together these teachers."

Collaboration and Commitment from Partner Organisations

The vision of the partnership was to provide rural and remote locations access to quality professional learning opportunities. In order for this to be successful, the commitment from key people within the partner organisations was vital. The commitment consisted of an initial planning meeting, three meetings prior to Seminar One, three meetings prior to Seminar Two, attendance at both videoconference seminars and a debrief meeting at the completion of the project. This involved approximately 20 hours of voluntary time per person. This collaborative time equaled approximately 120 hours. Additionally, each key person were delegated further roles such as liaising with regional co-ordinators, sourcing suitable videoconferencing facilities and catering for the metropolitan members.

7. CHALLENGES OF THE INITIATIVE

Key People in Co-ordination Roles

This research established that the successful implementation of an initiative such as this was highly dependent on the co-ordinator role within the rural and remote locations. The task of identifying someone willing to take on a voluntary role to organise advertising, locate a suitable venue, trial the technology link up and source catering proved difficult. The opportunity for a rural centre to participate was based on the availability of such a person; hence this governed or restricted the rural locations that participated within this initiative. Over time, the partnership will build a network of coordinators and this challenge could diminish.

Catering to Specific Professional Learning Needs

The relevance or the importance of the topic at a particular point in time has been identified as a challenge. The size of the rural audience varied considerably between the two topics. While both the hot topics covered very important aspects of education, there is an argument that for the classroom teacher in the bush (often early in their careers and often coming to terms with living in very different environments) they need professional learning "for survival" – information and skills that have instant application. This leads to the challenge of knowing what rural teachers needs are in terms of professional learning. This is also related to audience critical mass. In larger centres, a range of topics can be offered and while numbers attending will vary, it is possible to gain enough participants to cover costs. In smaller centres, the risk of smaller

numbers (unless the topic is highly relevant) can result in smaller numbers and marginal cost issues. This is especially relevant for voluntary organisations.

Technology Challenges

One week prior to each video link up, a trial session was held to ensure any technical issues could be addressed. For Session One, a decision was made to use the studio room to provide a professional delivery of the videoconference. A number of technical issues occurred within this session, audio problems were encountered for some rural locations and although rural locations could see the presenter, the presenters and studio audience were unable to see the participants at other locations. Predominantly, the benefit of using videoconferencing is to be able to synchronously view the participants involved within the conference. A decision was made by the working group to use the Polycom within the workshop room to provide an image of each audience. This topology can be seen in Figure 2. This method of networking proved to be more successful; however, a technology glitch with the presenters Powerpoint file was encountered. The presenter was indicating to a technician when to broadcast the Powerpoint slides, however this was not able to be viewed by either the local workshop audience or the regional areas. This Powerpoint file was emailed to all regional centres after for their reference. The second seminar provided far more networking and collegiality as each audience were able to view the questions and comments from participants.

Access to Venue with Videoconferencing

Finding a cost-effective venue with videoconferencing equipment was a significant challenge to the working group. In some large regional centres, the co-ordinators were faced with no videoconference facilities or were available with cost and time restrictions. This was encountered in Busselton, a thriving regional centre with a population of 27,500, where the only videoconferencing available was at the Busselton Magistrates Office. This venue was not cost effective for the predicted number of attendees as described by the regional co-ordinator: "The courthouse usually closes at 4.30pm. As this is afterhours it will cost $49 per hour and we will have to pay for a minimum of 3 hours, making the total $147, not including the $64 booking fee. There is also an additional payment of $180 per hour if we have to dial out to you from there." After discussions with many local government agencies and education organisations in the town of Busselton, it was decided by the co-ordinator to advise local attendees to travel to Bunbury (52km north) to join the video linkup. The regional co-ordinator in Bunbury encountered a similar situation in sourcing a venue. Facilities were available at Edith Cowan University in Bunbury but policy restrictions intended them for employee use only. The South West Regional College of TAFE eventually became the venue for the Bunbury/Busselton link up at a cost of $132 for the first hour and $66 per hour after or part of. A total of 4 educators who were non-ACE members from the Bunbury/Busselton region attended the seminar at $20 per person. This indicates the importance of the financial support from the partner organisations.

Partnership In-Kind Support

As with many voluntary positions, challenges are encountered with time, energy, planning and facilitation by people who also are employed in fulltime positions. The partnership worked collaboratively to facilitate and co-ordinate two seminars that included rural locations. Although the working group believed the planning roles were evenly distributed, there is a need for all partner organisations to be equal stakeholders in every aspect. The cost to participants to attend was set at $10 for ACE members and $20 for non-ACE members. It was noted that members of other organisations were not recognised with a discounted registration fee. Funds collected from

the seminars offset costs for ACE but other costs were picked up by RREAC – e.g. the cost of bridging and hire of the SIDE venue. In order to ensure further successes in delivery such initiatives to rural areas there would be a need to source sponsorship opportunities.

8. CONCLUSION

While challenges were encountered with using videoconferencing to connect the professional learning community of educators; the successes clearly outweigh the challenges experienced.

The ACE/RREAC/SIDE/SPERA partnership is now committed to building on this professional learning program to deliver a range of modules based on feedback gained from participants, coordinators, presenters and organisers. Information gathered will provide the basis for ongoing improvement.

The importance of partnerships is reinforced within Recommendation 10 of the national survey conducted by the National Centre of Science, ICT and Mathematics Education for Rural and Regional Australia (SiMERR):

> "….education authorities in partnership with schools and school communities, universities and professional organisations meet the continuing professional development needs of teachers through a range of strategies that ensure equitable access to ongoing professional learning….." (Lyons, Cooksey, Panizzon, Parnell & Pegg, 2006, p. xiii)

This paper has provided a snapshot of the partnership's vision to improve access to quality, cost effective professional learning for educators in regional and remote Western Australia. The challenges and successes encountered by the working group in order to use videoconferencing as a vehicle to deliver quality, structured, cost effective, locally accessible professional learning have been outlined. The identified need to provide equitable access for teachers in rural and remote areas is of extreme importance to the members of the partnership and further initiatives are within the planning stages.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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