

DEVELOPING A LIFELONG LEARNING COMMUNITY: THE WEST END CONNECT PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores lifelong learning in a community. It reports on the West End Connect Project, a collaborative partnership between the Queensland University of Technology and the State Library of Queensland. The process of providing ethnic community members with lifelong learning opportunities through information and communications technology training is explored and discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This paper discusses a community-based project – West End Connect – that was established to provide lifelong learning opportunities, through information and communications technology (ICT) training, to ethnic and/or migrant community members. The West End Connect project is a collaborative endeavour between the State Library of Queensland (SLQ) and the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The project, funded by a Faculty of Information Technology, Community Service Grant, aims to promote lifelong learning within the inner Brisbane suburb of West End. The project involved the design, delivery, and evaluation of ICT training sessions to two West End community groups: The Women's Ethnic Network, and the African Women's Network. Ethnic and/or migrant groups were targeted for two reasons – the West End area has traditionally been home to ethnic and migrant populations, and the State Library of Queensland had identified the area of ICT training for ethnic and emerging communities as largely unexplored within their activities.

This paper is divided into three parts. Part one provides a brief overview of lifelong learning with emphasis on the Australian situation. Part two outlines the West End Connect community project; the implementation of the project is detailed and the four stages of the project are presented. Part three discusses the impact of the project in terms of lifelong learning opportunities for members of the target communities. Recommendations for future community ICT projects are provided.

LIFELONG LEARNING

The director of the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), Institute of Education notes in Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, and Mauch (2001),

that lifelong learning is “now an indispensable tool ... a right and a joy”.

The concept of lifelong learning emerged under the guise of lifelong education in the 1960s. Field (2001) provides a concise but detailed view of the history and development of the concept, which is outside the scope of this paper. Many writers claim the development of the concept is straightforward, from early views of lifelong learning as “humanistic and even radical”, to a more recent alignment with “economistic implications” (Field, 2001, p. 3). This section will provide a brief overview of the current understandings of lifelong learning which have informed the current project.

Medel-Añonuevo, Ohsako, and Mauch (2001) point out that there is no shared understanding, at the global level, of the term lifelong learning (p. 1). They suggest there has been a predominantly economic interpretation of the concept over the last ten years. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2004) defines lifelong learning as the “learning path(way) of an individual throughout their lifetime, which is initiated at birth, develops through schooling and other formal and non-formal types of learning, and continues throughout adult life”. Martin, as cited in Nouwens (2002), advocates a broad view of lifelong learning – one which incorporates “both the economic perspectives ... and humanistic, personal development perspectives” (p. 2). Larsen (1999) believes that lifelong learning lies at “the heart of ... formal and informal training at all ages” (p. 74). The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) (2004) promotes lifelong learning in holistic terms and “recognises learning in and from many different environments” (p. 2). Dohmen, as cited in Field (2001), stresses the need for learners to “choose and combine their own learning processes ... in a way that meets their specific needs” (p. 11). The role of non-government organisations in promoting lifelong

learning is emphasised by UNESCO (Field, 2001, p. 9). There is a strong sense through the literature that lifelong learning must be available and promoted effectively to all groups within society.

Lifelong learning in Australia

It is outside the scope of this paper to list available government information on lifelong learning. A search of Australian government sources will find a large range of lifelong learning information and policies that focus on health information provision, workforce inclusion, language acquisition, and formal adult education.

The literature reveals lifelong learning and ICT initiatives, concerning migrant and ethnic community members, that focus on language acquisition, workforce entry, and formal education participation. Barrett (2002), talks briefly about the role ethnic community members can play in supporting migrants and refugees through home tutoring programs. Allender (1998), details policies and practices which have been developed to facilitate lifelong learning for migrants and refugees in Australia.

In Australia, libraries have a major role to play in the provision of resources and programs which promote lifelong learning opportunities. The role of libraries in providing access to necessary resources is becoming more significant (Australian Library Information Association [ALIA], 2004). The current project partnership reflects this role. The State Library of Queensland recognises an obligation to foster lifelong learning within minority groups and offers a range of multicultural programs. The provision of ICT training to ethnic and migrant communities is recognised as an area not yet fully explored (Cooper, 2004, personal communication).

In some Australian states, the development of ICT policy in education includes a strong commitment to lifelong learning, although this is not apparent at the national level (Kearns and Grant, 2002). The Queensland Government (2002) has identified lifelong learning as one of the elements of the "smart state". The Smart State Strategy (Queensland Government, 2002) is, however, largely an economic development initiative. The 2004-2008 Brisbane City Council Corporate Plan promotes library-community partnerships, which foster the development of lifelong learning for the residents of Brisbane. Minority groups are identified as targets for

inclusion. In particular, the plan acknowledges current projects aimed at improving ICT access, skills, and knowledge for Brisbane residents, and aims to extend these activities (Brisbane City Council, 2004).

THE WEST END CONNECT COMMUNITY PROJECT

West End: a brief profile

West End is a rapidly changing, economically and culturally diverse inner city suburb of Brisbane. The suburb is both home and meeting place for members of the Indigenous community and one of Brisbane's most multicultural suburbs. In the 2001 census West End had a population of 5832, with 2.4% of the people identified as being of Indigenous origin, and 31.3% of the people having been born overseas. The main three countries of birth were Greece, the United Kingdom, and Viet Nam. 3831 people stated English as the only language spoken at home. There were 3001 males and 2831 females. The median age was 33 years. At this time, 19% of the population lived in lone person households.

The 2001 Census also indicated that 56% of the population either had no educational qualification or stated no educational qualification. In terms of the labour market, 12% of the residents were unemployed, with 35% of the employed residents holding part-time positions only. The median range of weekly income for the area was \$300-\$399. In 2001, less than half of the suburb's residents had a personal computer in their home, and less than 12% of homes had an Internet connection (ABS, 2001). West End enjoys a vibrant, café-society street profile, with an influx of visitors on weekends. Gentrification of an area now considered valuable real estate is likely to impact the community in a number of ways. Increasingly, the population is separating into groups: people who have access to, and are comfortable using, ICT – the "haves"; and people who do not have access to and are not comfortable using ICT – the "have-nots".

Partners in lifelong learning

Two community partners were involved in the project. Each community partner has played a distinctive role in the successful completion of the project:

The State Library of Queensland is the official community partner for the current project. SLQ

seeks to “empower communities” by trying to “improve information literacy and lifelong learning opportunities” (SLQ, 2004) for Queensland residents. Initial agreement was reached that SLQ would provide both trainers and training facilities. SLQ training modules were also offered for use by the project team.

The Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland (ECCQ) played a vital role as unofficial project partner. The ECCQ is a community organization, based in West End. It was established in 1976 to “represent the interests of the many people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds who are part of the broad social community of Queensland, and to promote multiculturalism” (ECCQ, n.d., para 1.). The role of the ECCQ was to put the project team in touch with communities likely to be interested in ICT training opportunities. It also offered meeting facilities for focus groups and feedback sessions.

The QUT role was to fund and organize all stages of the project, to provide project officers to seek out suitable community members, conduct focus groups as required, design and deliver training sessions with SLQ assistance, compile feedback, and report back to all stakeholders at the conclusion of the project.

The West End community: a working definition

One of the first challenges to be faced in the project was establishing a working understanding of what is the “West End community”. Taking into consideration the significant social, economic, and political changes that have impacted upon the West End area in recent years, the project team made two decisions: (a) to have a flexible and adaptive understanding of the West End community and of West End community groups (i.e., group members may either work or live in the area and/or the group holds meeting and events in the area); and (b) to consult with the ECCQ (which is based in West End) to aid in identifying community groups appropriate for the current project. Through the ECCQ, the following two community groups were invited to be involved in the project:

1. The Women’s Ethnic Network is a community group “working with and for immigrant & refugee women”. It is a well established group based at the ECCQ and holds regular meetings and events in the

community with group members working and/or living in West End.

2. The African’s Women’s Network is a community group aimed at supporting immigrants and refugee woman from Africa. It is a relatively small community group. Whilst the group is not based in West End per se (many of its members live and work outside of the area), the group holds its meetings at the ECCQ and, as such, has ties to the community. Both of these groups identify informal education as one of their major activities.

Pathway to lifelong learning: project implementation

The ten-month West End Connect project began in November, 2004, and consisted of four stages. The stages are discussed below.

- Stage 1: Exploratory research with community groups to identify ICT training needs.
- Stage 2: Design ICT training courses to meet the needs identified in Stage 1.
- Stage 3: Conduct the ICT training courses.
- Stage 4: Evaluate and disseminate the results of the ICT training courses.

Stage one – researching the community groups: Initially, the SLQ recommended a list of possible associations to target. Early and ongoing difficulties making contact with some of these groups led the project team to approach the ECCQ which is a service provider having regular, ongoing contact with ethnic communities in Queensland. The ECCQ was eager to be involved in the project. Thus, the first part of the project was a two-fold step: (a) identifying through the ECCQ the two or three West End community groups to be involved in the project, and (b) developing a detailed understanding of the specific ICT training needs and other unique requirements of the groups. These goals were achieved by interviewing the ECCQ executive manager and through community focus group sessions.

The semi-structured interview allows information about people’s views, opinions, ideas, and experiences to be obtained (Arskey and Knight, 1999) and as such is an appropriate data collection method for the current stage of the project. The interview with the ECCQ executive manager identified Women’s Ethnic Network, and the African’s Women’s Network as being appropriate for the project.

Focus groups allow for the gathering of qualitative data through carefully planned discussion within a protected and non-threatening environment. They are an appropriate choice for the current project because of their ability to produce concentrated amounts of data on precisely the topic of interest and because there is the “opportunity for the clarification of responses and for follow up questions” (Morgan, 1997, p. 13). Focus group sessions were held with members of these groups to gather data on the ICT training needs and priorities of the groups. The West End Connect project focus group process highlighted the extent to which older migrants, particularly women, engaged with computer technology.

Two focus groups were held to discuss how the participants used information and communication technologies in their daily lives, and what they perceived as their personal training needs and the training needs of the groups and associations to which they belonged. The first focus group was held at ECCQ House at West End. Most of the participants were older women who had each been resident in Australia for at least ten years. Most had mixed feelings about the information communication technology they had used – realising it was of benefit to them but that it also created a lot of frustration and problems that took up time and forced them to rely on husbands, children, and grandchildren to help them with the problems they encountered. All participants expressed the desire to develop the skills and confidence to sort out their own problems. Many of the women had found previous formal training courses difficult due to barriers created by terminology, language, and the pace of instruction. They volunteered information about these barriers and stressed many times that the instruction would need to be “basic basic” as if “we don’t know anything”. They valued instruction delivered in a hands-on manner rather than written instructions, but several identified that they quickly forgot the information they were told. Most of the women were active within the community and almost all wished to be able to create flyers, newsletters, and brochures to more effectively communicate information to others. They were able to identify some aspects of their ICT needs, and the uses that they would like to improve on or learn more about.

The second focus group of seven women from the African Women’s Network met at Annerley and Districts Community Centre. Most of these women had at least some experience using

ICTs, particularly mobile phones, which they deemed important for keeping in touch with family and community members. All wished to improve their computer use and to become more self-reliant in this regard so they didn’t have to rely on their children’s help or for someone to sit with them when they were using a computer. There was a broader scope of needs compared to the first focus group as many of the women commented that they “need to know everything” or “need to know it all”. The women seemed reasonably confident in their own abilities to improve their skills and knowledge and were not daunted by the prospect. Many of the women stressed that sessions would need to be delivered out-of-hours to accommodate working women. Most of the women wanted to improve their computer skills, in part, to improve communication within their communities by preparing flyers, newsletters, and brochures, and using email. This group had a higher rate of ownership of hardware than the women of the first focus group, e.g., digital cameras, but they often did not know how to use them. The need for training at a slow pace with time to practise skills was also stressed by several women.

Stage two – designing ICT training sessions: Three training courses were designed to cater for the specific needs of the two community groups:

1. **Beginning Email:** This session aims to provide a basic overview to email communication by allowing the participants to (a) create an email account, and (b) send and receive an email. Participants also have the opportunity to explore the functions within the email interface, e.g., attachments and address books. The two-hour session uses a brief PowerPoint presentation, independent activities, whole group discussion, and hands-on exercises.
2. **Effective Communication Flyers:** This two-hour session aims to provide a basic overview to creating a flyer by allowing the participants to (a) discuss the key features of an effective flyer, (b) create a flyer using a prepared template in MSWord, and (c) experiment with different flyer templates in MSWord. Participants also have the opportunity to overcome any fears of saving and accessing their completed work. The two-hour session uses a brief PowerPoint presentation, independent activities, cooperative learning, group discussion, and hands-on exercises.

3. **Beginning Internet:** This two-hour session aims to provide a basic overview on searching for information using the Internet by allowing the participants to (a) search for known and unknown resources using Google, (b) understand the key features of a URL, (c) develop an understanding of the importance of search terms when searching for information, and (d) practice identifying quality items from results lists. The two-hour session uses a brief PowerPoint presentation, independent activities, group discussion, and hands-on exercises.

Geragogy, or “the strategies employed in teaching older adults” (Formosa, 2002, p. 73) formed the theoretical basis for the design of the sessions held with the Women’s Ethnic Network. Focus group participant ages ranged from 48 to 77 years, with a mean age of 65.8 years. As the focus group participants were also going to be the ICT training participants, geragogy was an appropriate guiding theoretical framework for these training sessions. The design and delivery of the training sessions were developed to incorporate key features of geragogy; namely, that learning be social – involving group discussions and peer learning. Delivery was paced to allow plenty of time to do the tasks and activities (Formosa, 2002)

The session with the African Women’s Network was guided less by geragogy and more by adult learning theory or andragogy (Knowles, 1978). Focus group participant ages ranged from 25 to 53 years, with a mean age of 44.3 years. As the focus group participants were also going to be the ICT training participants, andragogy was an appropriate guiding framework. The design and delivery of the training sessions, therefore, took into consideration Knowles’s description of the typical adult learner as someone who prefers to learn through purposeful activities which have meaning to their everyday lives.

Stage three – conducting the ICT training sessions: Three training sessions were held for the Women’s Ethnic Network – one each of the three sessions described above. One session – the Beginning Internet – was held for the African Women’s Network. This was the only session held for the group because of difficulties in arranging times for the group to get together.

Locating suitable training venues was a significant challenge. It was necessary for the training venue to accommodate ICT-specific requirements. A number of different venues were considered, including the Brisbane City Council West End Library, Brisbane State High

School, and the West End primary school. Ultimately, two training venues were located for the project: (a) a training room at the State Library of Queensland, Montague Road premises; and (b) a training room at the Junction Park State School. The use of school facilities to foster lifelong learning opportunities is promoted by Education Queensland (2004).

Stage Four – Evaluating the ICT training sessions: Three evaluation strategies were used to assess the impact of the West End Connect project:

1. **ICT training evaluation survey:** Participant feedback was formally obtained via self-administered surveys at the end of each session. The survey was developed by the project team to determine the success of the ICT training courses in meeting the ICT knowledge and skill development of the participants. The results from the survey suggest that, overall, the participants found the ICT training to be valuable. Evaluation surveys were completed in three of the four trainings sessions.
2. **One-on-one, semi-structured interviews:** Participants were invited to follow-up interviews to take place three months after the training courses. The decision to participate was voluntary, with participants able to withdraw at any time. Interviews were held at ECCQ House on 12th December 2005, with six participants from the Women’s Ethnic Network in attendance. The stimulus questions aimed to elicit feedback in terms of participants’ ongoing feelings about using ICT, whether or not they had shared training experiences with other community members, and what further support or training they would like to undertake. All participants expressed a need for ongoing technical support for their activities. One indicated she had used the local library for Internet access and support. They expressed a desire to develop further ICT skills, which indicates an interest in continuing lifelong learning with ICTs. Some of the participants had used their new skills to facilitate communication within their community by creating newsletters and flyers. All the women had shared the experience with others in the community and they had the names of others wanting similar learning experiences.
3. **Project officer reflections:** On completing the delivery of the training courses, the two project officers were asked to write their

reflective thoughts on its process of the project and the outcomes. In terms of process, three significant points were noted: (a) the need to locate a suitable training venue for future ICT training for the West End community, (b) the importance of having a more overt connection between the training and the SLQ – by having SLQ staff present at the training sessions, and (c) the need for more formalised role definition to ensure that agreed levels of participation are delivered. The second point was raised as it would help develop a more permanent ongoing relationship between SLQ and the West End community, which has the potential to lead to sustained commitment to lifelong learning in the area. The project roles originally agreed upon by SLQ were not fulfilled as time constraints and staffing issues meant there were no SLQ trainers available for the sessions. The basic ICT training modules offered for use were not suitable as they were too complex or too advanced for the novice users. The degree of prior experience of the participants demanded a tailor-made training session.

In terms of outcomes, the sheer joy and enthusiasm apparent as these women talked about the empowerment they felt to continue to use ICTs, in some cases independently for the first time, seem highly significant when considering the likelihood that they may seek out further lifelong learning experiences. It was also very positive that these women had communicated their joy and confidence to friends and community members.

PROJECT COSTS

The project was funded by a Faculty of Information Technology, Community Services Grant from QUT. The total value of the grant was \$5936.78. There were two project officers who carried out all focus group and training activities. The project officers cost \$5662 for 200 hours work. \$84.78 was spent on catering for the focus groups and training sessions. One registration, costing \$735.45, was paid for a project officer to attend the International Conference on Engaging Communities which was held in Brisbane in August 2005. Project costs were minimised as SLQ and Education Queensland provided the training venues at no charge.

EVALUATION SUMMARY

Participants had expressed a high degree of frustration with past training encounters due to a mismatch between their needs and expectations and the course material and its delivery – leading to limited lifelong learning opportunities in the area of ICTs. It seems clear that session content should be informed by the self-identified needs and desires of the participants and should be delivered at a pace and level determined by the participants themselves. The project indicated that lifelong learning could be enhanced for a target group by providing opportunities to develop basic computing skills training at a level that encourages continued engagement, as well as skill and confidence building, for the community members involved. All participants expressed a wish to use their skills to promote the activities of their community groups, with two participants having created a newsletter and information flyer. This may foster lifelong learning opportunities within the community.

Participants appreciated the safe and supportive environment that the sessions created. They commented that they did not feel stupid or lacking because of their inexperience. The surveys showed they were satisfied with the content, level, and pace of the sessions. All participants wished there could be a continuing series of such workshops. The majority of them said the sessions had made a positive difference to their confidence in using computers. The positive feelings instilled during the training course may contribute to a continued desire to pursue future ICT activities. The feedback poses a challenge to communities to provide ongoing lifelong learning opportunities for members.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations arose directly from what worked well and what caused problems during the current project:

- Approach potential groups through a governing body such as the Ethnic Communities Council of Queensland to promote effective communication between project stakeholders.
- Arrange use of local venues for the training sessions early so this information is available when conducting initial focus groups
- Limit group sizes to ensure maximum participation and effective participant-trainer ratios.

- Design session content and training at a level and pace determined by the participants themselves.
- Engage participants in authentic, real-world tasks in response to focus group findings.
- Formalise the agreement between partners, particularly in relation to the roles to be played by each partner.

CONCLUSION

The West End Connect project outlined in this paper will help the Brisbane community to take steps to promote lifelong learning within its boundaries. More collaborative community projects aimed at developing a lifelong learning community are needed if Brisbane is truly to become a “smart and inclusive city”. If we are to meet the IFLA challenge of developing a holistic approach to lifelong learning “in and through different environments” then we must become actively engaged in partnerships which promote lifelong learning in community.

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