TEACHING FROM COUNTRY
Notes from the Techy meeting at SAIKS Oct 30th 08

During this week we are holding workshops and meetings to bring the TFC project a step further. On Tuesday Wednesday and Thursday we are working with Yolŋu consultants to develop some resources which might be useful for teaching from country. On Monday, after Trevor had arrived from south, and before the Yolŋu arrived from Arnhemland, we had a meeting where we called together as many people as we could muster to talk about software and connectivity. What software would best be engaged for Teaching from Country given the connectivity options?

We had arrived at three possibilities which we presented to people who came to the meeting:
- the teacher has a website, and the students look at same website from wherever they are, while they communicate by phone or VOIP. The disadvantage of this options is that the teachers and the students need to tell each other what they can see and where they are going, but the advantage is that this is the most simple and band-width friendly
- we share the website and other resources using some proprietary pedagogical software like Winba, IDL, etc for which the university has a license
- we share the website and other resources through proprietary screen sharing (like Teamviewer)

The people who attended were: Trevor vW, Joh G, and Michael from the project, Barbara White and Jodi Tutty from the School of Information Technology, Sarah Scott, who is involved in the program in her role teaching Indigenous fine arts at CDU, and Helen Rysavy, Helen Wosniak, and Trevor Billany from the Teaching and Learning Development Group at the university. We had invited people from government (working with the NT Department of Education and Training), but they were unable to attend.

Michael started off by showing the TFC poster, and talking about the overall aims of the project. He outlined the three options, and opened discussion.

Trevor commented that the borders are pretty flexible. There are different histories and agendas at work in the various Yolŋu communities, and different options and impediments in terms of internet connectivity (not to mention the various political, cultural, historical etc factors) in each of the possible sites.

Helen W asked about the possible involvement of schools, and TvW pointed out that in our first meetings (and in the IKRMNA project) the Yolŋu had been pretty keen to avoid working through any governmental institution (schools, councils, knowledge centres) – anything where they had to 'ask a Balanda for a key' to get through a door to do their work. The Yolŋu consultant-researchers are keen to set up systems with their own computers in their own spaces. He added that we weren't closing off those opportunities, and in fact we would probably be working with the Buku-Larrŋgay Arts Centre at Yirrkala for the fine arts teaching with Sarah Scott, and the Yalu Centre at Galiwin'ku. Anything is possible at this early stage.

The conversation turned to broadband issues – the Next G system being 'rolled out' by Telstra, and the BigPond 7.2MB/sec options. The government and associated organizations keep promising much in terms of broadband access in remote areas of Australia, but there are often hold-ups, difficulties and disappointments in its delivery. We can't make the project depend upon government promises, but we must keep an eye to what the future might bring.

Helen W turned the conversation towards what exactly the Yolŋu would want to show. We talked about assemblages of digital resources, about resisting having representations set in concrete yet (noting the popularity of PowerPoint with Yingiya and Gotha – the only two who have been working intensively and independently on their digital knowledge work), but allowing the remote teaching interactions to depend upon showing, questioning, responding, reconfiguring objects, and representing claims to students. The questions of what we/they want to do, and the socio-technical arrangements which might make it possible, are inseparable. We want to solve the pedagogical, representational and technical questions together, not one at a time – which makes our task more difficult – almost impossible - but also more accountable, more faithful and more interesting.

We talked about the comparative advantages of proprietory software like Wimba (for which the university has a license), and other more 'light-weight packages' (Jodi) like 'Vyew' (Barbara has used it) which are smaller in their requirements, so take less memory to run. Maybe Wimba can be 'stripped down' to make it a lightweight package useful for the bandwidth starved lecturers in remote locations?

The software discussion led us to talking about exactly what the bandwidth requirement might be. There is a broad range of internet availability in the communities we work with. The first of the three options – we look at the remote lecturer's website and talk to them over the phone – does not require rapid upload of image or voice to the web. The remote lecturer can upload the content to the web long before the lecture, and the students – very appropriately (although not what we really had in mind) – can have a good look at it before the lecture. So talking over the phone about what we have both already seen is a parsimonious but very viable option – compared, for example with screen sharing, where there needs to be a constant upload, and the students don't get a chance to examine the representations beforehand (which may be a good thing?).

This brought the discussion back to Wimba, Elluminate, React etc which are proprietary packages which Trevor vW has seen working very successfully with the Balanda butcher's children at Kalkiringi on the Victoria River Downs. These solutions require a moderator who knows which buttons to press and keeps the conversation under control. Jodi: If the moderator is a balanda coordinator on campus, and the lecturer is just a Yolŋu participant in a remote location – what does that mean for authority and control in a teaching situation?

We turned to talking about the various arrangements of students and teachers. Sarah, in her fine arts course, has about a dozen students on campus, and a dozen or so studying remotely using their computers. Can we make arrangements which include remote students in remote teaching? An important consideration.

We ended after an hour and a half with a few actions:
- Michael to write up these notes and circulate them, with a view to putting them up on the web for general consideration
- Helen R to send the directory of Web 2.0 teaching softwares for TvW to look at and evaluate (already done, thanks)
- Trevor B to look at whether Wimba can be stripped down and report back (already done, thanks).

Overall conclusion:
- We all seemed to be on the same page, there don't seem to be any completely new or revolutionary solutions which we haven't already had a look at although there is a vast number available, and each solution seems to have slightly different functionality from the last. We don't really want to end up with a completely different solution for each site, but that may happen.
- Questions about software choices and connectivity continue to be utterly site specific. We can't make any overall recommendations. We just need to narrow down the huge range of possibilities to a small range of options which might be useful in a small number of locations.
- We have a good group of interested and well-informed collaborators, and need to keep them in on the discussion.

Thanks everyone.
Please visit www.cdu.edu.au/tfc