Chapter 7
Introducing the Teaching and Learning Benefits of the WWW in Aboriginal Schools:
Trials and Tribulations

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, projects undertaken at two independent Aboriginal boarding schools in remote Western Australia are described. Both projects have sought to provide instructional advice for teachers and to enhance students' literacy levels through access to the internet. A dedicated website was developed for each school to respond specifically to the students' language and literacy needs. Several positive outcomes resulted from the projects. At the first school, code-switching was accepted throughout the school and even formed part of classroom instruction. At the second school, staff in general showed great interest in supporting their students' use of the online resource. Students who accessed the website were excited by the prospect of having their photos and videos uploaded and even suggested improvements to the site. Despite the above successes, the introduction of the websites at each school did not occur without problems which are described in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter reports on the implementation of online learning projects undertaken at two separate independent Aboriginal schools in remote Western Australia. At one site, a vocational education school, a website sought to address student language needs – academic, personal, communicative and vocational. At the second site, a K-12 school, a website for the whole school was developed which included various

online material, including class blogs for students to interact with teachers and to serve as an additional tool to enhance literacy.

As the title of this chapter suggests, considerable challenges were involved in the implementation of these projects which, although differing from each other, stemmed from similar attitudes to students accessing the internet and to teachers' reservations.

BACKGROUND

Uptake of E-Learning

For almost two decades e-learning has been a fundamental innovation in school contexts. Early ventures into this area were tentative and hindered by hardware and software issues and by connectivity with little evidence of benefits for students. However with the interactivity afforded by Web 2 resources, the functionality of e-learning has improved exponentially through more user-friendly and faster web browers and access to extensive information searching facilities such as Google, Wikipedia, and Google Earth. Web 2.0 innovations which now provide the interactivity of social media (e.g., blogs, Facebook, etc.) have also revolutionised the notion of e-learning, particularly by allowing students to contribute to blogs and other similar platforms. More recently, problems of affordability have also been overcome with mobile resources and particularly smart phones which make access to the World Wide Web more available to those who would not normally own a computer.

Research suggests, however, that attitudes to the uptake of e-learning, particularly in school contexts, have been varied. In some cases "using the Internet for research has become a common practice … [and] [t]eachers routinely direct students to use the Internet as an information-seeking tool" (Barratt, 2012, p. 42). Other schools have been reluctant to introduce e-learning due either to negative attitudes on the part of the principal and/or teachers, or due to teachers undervaluing the benefits of this mode of learning (Mulwa & Dorothy, 2013; Tekerek & Ercan, 2012).

A number of teachers have experimented with various types of e-learning, including using class or learning 'blogs'. The advantage of these are that they enhance interaction between teachers and students in relation to such things as assignments and class announcements, and with parents for providing information about the school (Ho, Cheng & Huang, 2013). The value of blogs lies in the periodic date stamping of each post which can be viewed in chronological order. This enables teachers to keep track of students' development both in terms of their growing confidence with the technology and their literacy development. Blogs are also easy for the less technologically experienced to use.

Considerable success has been achieved in classrooms with the use of blogs, such as in fostering student discussion (Beldarrain, 2006). Blogs are also useful for displaying photos and setting up activities. Importantly blogs provide the opportunity to develop collaborative literacy (Boling, Castek, Zawilinski, Barton & Nierlich, 2008). A study by Lou, Wu, Shih & Tseng (2010) of blogging found that, as a consequence of using blogs, students' writing improved significantly in post-tests and the students themselves attributed this to reading others' work via this mode. Shearer (2010) claims that blogs in the classroom are necessary, not only to develop the technological skills for today's workforce, but to enhance communication and collaboration skills. Blogs in particular enable students to translate "their own ideas, opinions, and past experiences and knowledge into words, while also requiring them to analyse and evaluate the ideas and opinions of others in their blog community" (Shearer 2010, p. 260).

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