

# **PRINCIPLES OF GOOD PRACTICE IN DEVELOPING ONLINE COMMUNITIES FOR LEARNING PARTNERSHIPS**

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Leone Wheeler is Manager, Regional Learning Networks, Community Services/Regional Partnerships, Research and Development at RMIT University. A major part of Leone's work involves the development of RMIT Learning Partnerships which involved the establishment of a network of community based access points in metropolitan Melbourne for the delivery of online training, supported by local staff. Leone is working to integrate this learning network model into the University regionality and internationalisation strategies. She has extensive experience as a project manager in a number of projects involving learning technologies at a State and National level.

## **Summary**

*The practical experience of running RMIT Learning Partnerships, a learning network project at RMIT University, is described here. Learning Partnership links Adult Community Education (ACE) providers in the northern metropolitan and central western metropolitan regions of Melbourne, with the University. It is a community of practice based around training partnerships and the provision of professional development in online education. It builds on the findings of a national Australian study of online networks in the vocational education and training sector (ANTA Online Networks in VET) and outlines a range of success factors required in order to ensure long-term sustainability of a learning network.*

## Introduction

This article describes the practical experience of running RMIT Learning Partnerships, a learning network project at RMIT University, which links Adult Community Education (ACE) Providers in the northern metropolitan and central western metropolitan regions of Melbourne, with the University. It now also includes areas of rural Victoria, that is, Hamilton and Wangaratta. It is a community of practice based around training partnerships and the provision of professional development in online education. Partners provide access points (shop fronts, neighbourhood houses and flexible learning centres) and a supportive learning environment for adult, special needs and workplace learners. The partnership was formed in 1998 out of a successful Government tender and initial emphasis was on the delivery of online education. This has now evolved to become more focussed on developing a business framework based on building training partnerships with local communities. The framework places an emphasis on access and equity in the flexible delivery of learning.

The evolution of this business framework is also the basis for the development of an online community for the Partnership. This builds on the findings of a national Australian study of online networks in the vocational education and training sector (ANTA Online Networks in VET) - a yearlong investigation of online communities in the vocational education and training sector. The research team reviewed the literature, interviewed experienced moderators of online communities and studied six online communities selected from the vocational education and training sector. Wheeler (1997 and 1998) identified the following as key success factors in the establishment and maintenance of an online community:

- establishing a goal/purpose for an online community;
- a plan to deal with technical and access issues;
- a planned programme of professional development;
- the importance of the role of the moderator; and
- the need to establish a 'critical mass' to populate the online environment.

A further critical issue for the development of a learning network that was not dealt with in the Online Networks in VET study, is the importance of working towards long-term sustainability. It is important to hook into the social and political contexts of the communities in which the partnership operates. It is not a *one size fits all* philosophy and must be driven by community needs.

## Vision and Goals

The RMIT Learning Partnerships vision is *to provide our diverse community with access to dynamic learning in a changing world*. This is being achieved by:

- growing the community of RMIT-ACE partners for the delivery of learner centred, accessible, quality learning opportunities within local environments;
- building and nurturing an environment that values access to learning; and
- building a sustainable, dynamic, flexible learning community.

Building an online community of practice is critical to the development of this vision. This includes developing resources and networks in the following areas to help implement the vision including an online community for managers within the network and a professional community for our teachers based on the topic areas of liberal arts and language and literacy.

The establishment of a goal/purpose/vision for an online community is a common theme in the literature (Armstrong and Hagel, 1999, Schuler, 1997, Peschiera, 1999). Peschiera says that the Columbia Foundation began with a clear vision based on commonly shared values; that there are no ready made formulas for launching a broad-based community project and that relationships are

at the heart of community building. Alongside this is the development of trust that will bind the community together.

When a large international University partners with several smaller flexible learning centres trust is key. It is trust in the relationships, leadership and the encouragement of learning. Handy (1995) also talks about this in the development of networked organisations, which is essentially the nature of RMIT Learning Partnerships.

## **Access**

A plan to deal with access issues is extremely important. There is a digital divide where urban and affluent communities enjoy a far greater level of technical access, infrastructure and support than do rural, remote and low-income communities. Funston (2000) reports that in Australia there is an uneven spread of home Internet access in particular. This gap is not just in regional Australia and in Funston's research into Australia's youth and the digital divide identifies that for school students, it is based on family income, school sector, size of school, location, and girls are not doing as well as boys. Funston explains that most young people live in big cities in the populous states. Many community providers in Victoria are located in areas of low income or remote locations and are well placed to contribute to providing access where it is needed.

In practical terms the community providers involved in RMIT Learning Partnerships provide a supportive environment for adult learners who study RMIT accredited online courses. The learner is able to access a local learning mentor who counsels learners, enrolls them in online computer training as well as a range of other learning opportunities, both formal and informal.

## **Technical Issues**

It is essential that the community group must have access to a physical network and that it must work reliably. The recent evaluation of the Learning Network trials in Victoria, Australia, identified this as an essential criteria in determining whether to fund existing and new Learning Networks (PETE, 2000). Coate (1997) refers to the tangible and the intangible elements. The tangible being the hardware and software and the intangible being the people part. This is just as important as the tangible because the system is defined and shaped by *everyone's collective imagination as it is by the computers, discs, and software tools*. People must meet and determine how this will happen.

RMIT Learning Partnerships is able to draw from the IT support services as well as pool IT resources as a group. For example, smaller providers share costs for technical, specialist graphics staff and online teaching staff. The University was also successful in winning Commonwealth funding to enable bulk buying of computer hardware for the upgrade of equipment in the flexible learning centres.

## **Training and Professional Development**

It is important to plan a programme of professional development to introduce community members to the technology they will be using. In the ANTA Online Network in VET project this involved an initial face-to-face workshop to establish relationships. Participants were then encouraged to contribute to an online forum. They continued to be encouraged and supported by a mentor for the duration of the project. The Web site also contained further training notes as support.

A professional development programme for the RMIT Learning Partnerships has been developed in partnership with the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, which offers a Certificate in Online Teaching and Learning. In addition the partnership is building an online

community of practice for managers and teachers. This is specifically aimed at enabling groups to carry out their work more effectively and to reduce the need for face to face workshops and meetings.

### **Role of the Moderator**

In this context the term moderator is used as an umbrella term. It is not restricted to a narrow definition of a person who manages and filters discussion on a mailing list. The roles include contact person, coordinator and editor. In fact it is similar to Kovac's (1998) definition which is the 'Human in Charge'. In terms of maintaining an online community this role is a key factor of success. Mason (1995) says the moderator combines the roles of teacher, chairman, host facilitator and community organiser. The moderator plays an important role in building the online community. It is a very skilled role where one requires excellent communication, organisation and technical skills. Paulsen identifies this in terms of the organisational role, the social role and the intellectual role. In practical terms, it means the ability to welcome people to the online environment. Moderators can demonstrate this by introducing humour, thoughts of the day, interesting Web sites to look at and so on. It also involves coaching the participants. It is a role that involves a great deal of dedication and patience. RMIT Learning Partnerships is funding this role in the development of the online community. The Partnership will also train several enthusiasts and champions to ensure the ongoing survival of our learning community.

### **Critical Mass**

Critical mass is the minimum amount of resources, for example, people, money, time – needed before an online community has on-going activity. This is a long-term consideration. Many successful online communities have been built up over a two or three year period. For example, the Rural Women's Network in Queensland (Welink) is now in its fourth year of operation.

Researchers from Queensland University of Technology have followed this network for the period and have documented tremendous progress in its development. While a Canadian telecommunities project suggested four and a half years as a timeline for the establishment of a community network.

For example, project negotiation six months, project implementation one year, operational phase two years and evaluation, rethinking phase one year.

Professional development plays an important part in obtaining that critical mass. It involves everything that has been considered so far such as initially making participants familiar with the technology, addressing access issues, ongoing mentoring and developing strategies for facilitation to encourage ongoing use of the community. This requires ongoing resources and a funding base and this also raises issues of sustainability.

RMIT Learning Partnerships was successful in receiving funding to build a critical mass as part of the second stage of the development of the partnership.

### **Sustainability**

Long-term sustainability of a network of organisations based on alliances is the greatest challenge for RMIT Learning Partnerships. A model for delivering low cost RMIT accredited training to our communities has been developed. It is a key component for providing access to accredited training for our learners, but it does not make us sustainable in the long term. Other options being investigated include:

- charging individual users through subscriptions for the use of the services of the learning network;
- a join up fee for new Community Providers to become members of the Partnership;
- broadening the sources of government funding that is tendered for;
- expanding fee for service courses to subsidise our low cost training; and
- internal marketing to ensure continued subsidisation by the University.

Other initiatives will include approaching local businesses and international companies for cash donation, sponsorship and passing on of redundant equipment.

Each partner is also developing niche markets. For example, one is taking the lead on professional development, another in IT training and another ecommerce training. Key factors in working towards sustainability include engaging the help of a local champion, ensuring a secure income stream that does not rely of government funding, a niche market and the combining of resources.

## Conclusions

The greatest challenge faced by our Learning Partnerships is the ability to find the right niche market for a particular area or region that enables a mix of services and programmes that will ensure sustainability. That mix is likely to be different for each community and will be more likely to succeed if the community drives it. However, there are key elements of success that are common to all learning partnerships. These are a clear vision, a niche market, local champions, a critical mass of well trained people, the right mix of skills in the learning partnership team and an active online community to support the learning network.

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