

REMOTE SCHOOLING AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY: COMMENTS ON A RECENT SURVEY

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Introduction

In October 1990, a group from Australian Catholic University received a grant from the Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET) under the Structural Efficiency Principle for staff development. The aim of the project was to summarise and describe the use of technology for the provision and delivery of education to remote students. Typically these students are located in isolated rural areas. The intention was to produce an information kit for pre-service primary and secondary teachers, particularly those we see in the Bachelor of Teaching and Bachelor of Education programs offered at Signadou campus. While it is important to provide appropriate information and professional development for practising teachers, pre-service teachers must not be neglected in this process. It will be these teachers who will be helping set the agenda for the nature and type of developments that will take place with technology. As a result of the project a booklet and a short video were produced showing teachers and students using a variety of technologies for remote schooling.

Process

A literature review conducted in late 1990 and early 1991 helped identify current practice and provide a list of contact persons. A survey was sent to these individuals, groups and government departments and they were asked to describe their level and type of involvement in this area. These groups were then asked to suggest other useful contacts.

Based on the survey information and literature review, the current technologies were reviewed with respect to their involvement in the provision of audio (such as teleconferencing), visual (such as television and video-conferencing) and electronic information communication links (such as facsimile and electronic mail). Some consideration was also given to the issue of transmission links (such as ISDN and microwave). It is important to note that these technologies were not evaluated. They were described and in some cases a representative example of each use was selected for inclusion in the video. From the information collected a booklet was compiled describing the technologies, where and how they were being used, and a list of contact people was compiled. A draft of the booklet was then sent to all participants for comment. Inaccuracies and changes were identified and many valuable suggestions were provided which were incorporated into the final booklet. With assistance from the National Recording Studios in Canberra, a short video was produced to illustrate instances of current practice. The following table provides a broad view of the use of these technologies as seen by the authors during 1991.

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TABLE 1

AN OVERVIEW OF STATE AND TERRITORY USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR THE DELIVERY AND PROVISION OF REMOTE EDUCATION IN 1991

	ACT	NSW	NT	QLD	SA	TAS	VIC	WA
Tele-conferencing		*	*	.	*	*		
DUCT		.	*	*	*		*	*
1 way radio		.						
2 way radio		*	*	*	*		*	*
Computer supported learning		.	*	*				
Video-conferencing		*	*	*	*			
Microwave video					*			
UHF video				.				
Facsimile		*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Electronic mail	.	*	*	*	*	*	*	*
Bulletin boards	.	*			*		.	
Electronic white boards					*			
Data bases	*	*	*	*	*		.	*
Computer managed learning			.	.	.			
Electronic Classroom	.	*	*	*	.	.	*	*

* widespread examples
 . isolated examples

Observations

While the intent of this project was not to formally evaluate the use of these technologies some areas for further investigation were noted.

1. The provision of inservice/professional development appeared to vary greatly between states, departments and regions. While most provided some introductory courses very few provided continuing professional development opportunities.
2. Many teaching techniques are still very traditionally organised and there is a need to develop new and more powerful ways to facilitate learning. Comments from those working with these technologies suggest that there are unique opportunities for both teachers and students especially in the areas of developing learner independence and responsibility.
3. Comprehensive formative evaluations are not common and there is a need to critically examine ways of improving learning outcomes for our rural students. Groups have developed innovative ways of using the technology and their next step should be to focus on learning outcomes.
4. Most of these technologies have been used to establish teacher-student communication networks however the exchange and sharing between states, departments, groups and individuals developing these networks has been limited. In some cases this situation has allowed groups to re-invent wheel. There is a real need for national communication networks that are accessible to all. Most comments have suggested that people found the video and the list of contacts most useful which suggests that publications such as these, help facilitate sharing and exchange.

Future

In late 1991, the Department of Employment, Education and Training set up consultancies:

- to assess the feasibility of establishing a small national collaborative education communications body;
- to assess the desirability of a brokerage facility to service educational training providers of open learning;
- to identify opportunities for establishing common and agreed national technical specifications for telecommunications and computing equipment to be used in the delivery of open learning;
- to identify improved educational outcomes that can be addressed by open learning delivery;
- to evaluate broadcast Television as a delivery mechanism for education and training;
- to evaluate existing and potential use of learning centres to deliver open learning by a range of education/training providers.

These consultancies are due to report back in May 1992. A national perspective of the educational use of telecommunications has the potential to provide valuable direction and support however, any such national involvement must allow for the freedom of individuals and groups, to be innovative and respond to the needs of both teachers and students.

The booklet is still available and yearly updates of contacts, descriptions of current practice are planned. Negotiations with states and territories are in progress for the production of a video summarising recent teaching innovations with these technologies with the first being planned for November 1992. It is intended this would be available nationally and provide another avenue for information exchange. We would be very interested to hear from interested contributors to such a video. The future is exciting and with close co-operation there is the potential to improve the quality of education for our rural students.

Booklet Details

Robson, J., Routcliffe, P. and Fitzgerald, R. (1991) Remote Schooling and Information Technology (A Guide for Teachers). Australian Catholic University.

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