

## **A New Model in Online Training for Developing and Indigenous Communities**

Hewitson J\*

cicada.net.au, Australia

### **Abstract**

The successful use of ICT programs in Indigenous and developing communities requires a culturally appropriate model in terms of: the delivery platform, learning content, delivery process and the local context. Such a model has been developed by Cicada in challenging, remote Indigenous communities. This is called Online Documentary Training. Extracts from these online, interactive programs provide insights into how ICT can deliver not only to culturally diverse groups but also to a diverse range of IT infrastructure and skills. ODT is an ICT framework which produces social change within diverse cultures. These programs will be demonstrated in this session with some available for viewing at <<http://www.cicada.net.au>>.

“When conventional systems and approaches cannot meet the needs, it is necessary to look for new strategies” (UNESCO 2002).

In communities under the influence of conflict, poverty and disengagement, actively empowering the individual and community through the transference of learning and skills into daily life seems sometimes an impossible ask. So how can training, in any topic, be current, relevant, accessible and engage marginalised, isolated and poor communities? These were the challenges faced in response to requests for training from remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, in Far North Queensland, Australia.

Queensland is two and a half times the size of Texas (727,200 square kilometres) with small, remote communities isolated by desert, sea, distance, the wet season and the sense of powerlessness associated with marginalised populations. Such factors suit the use of technological platforms in the delivery of training, rather than face-to-face sessions, which remove Indigenous participants from their remote communities to train in regional centres. The latter is not only uneconomical because of the small populations spread over such a large territory, but also reduces the impact of the learning, which students must then transfer back into their communities as the new knowledge.

Many technology based training methods have been implemented in recent years, including Queensland Health’s award-winning audiographic training; CD-ROMs; touch-screen; and video conferencing. Overall, regardless of which system or technology is implemented, the results have not delivered the learning outcomes that lead to new behaviour and the desired changes in the wellbeing of the local Indigenous communities.

Increasingly, the need to use ICT in a culturally appropriate way has become obvious. On closer investigation there is a myriad number of factors which must be addressed under a culturally appropriate ICT framework. They include the learning content, delivery platforms and process, knowledge management and social change. To incorporate all these, the framework requires sufficient flexibility so as to respond to the diversity of the end users' local context. For Indigenous and many developing communities, this is often chaotic, resource and skill-poor, conflict-driven and socio-economically dysfunctional. The outcome is that potential learners are not in a position physically or psychologically to undertake learning, let alone transfer it into their daily lives to bring about social change. To work successfully in diverse cultural conditions, the ICT framework itself has to be reflective to local content, to physical and psychological accessibility and to social change. Where this can be accomplished, the use of ICT in cultural diversity has a secure base for operating.

In addressing these challenges, this paper presents an ICT training framework integrating models previously derived from film and health services, that is, Guerilla TV and Community Based Rehabilitation. Guerilla TV is a production model, which is an economic and philosophical construct in which the world is reflected from within the field, that is, the local communities; and the program acts as an agent of change in creating new permutations of culture (Hewitson 1998). Community Based Rehabilitation is a model of health service delivery also aiming to work as an agent of change and so is positioned under the Guerilla filmmaking paradigm. Both acknowledge hybridity as essential for intercultural communication (Lewis 1995) and community change. Hybridity is not just diversity, a series of parallel impulses, but rather a plurality, which combines to produce something new and unique (Turner 1994).

This then has formed the bases of what is termed Online Documentary Training (ODT) developed in 2001 to deliver training to remote Indigenous communities (Joe's Story '01). The fundamental elements of this framework are:

- localisation and ownership through end users creating and directing their own learning resources
- motivation through film, entertainment and personalisation of learning content
- implicit learning takes place with naturalistic absorption of knowledge and information through exposure
- engagement through interactivity of people, rather than the technology establishing ongoing dedicated support networks
- inclusiveness of content through learning content being open, not reliant on literacy or prior learning, visually and orally based

- currency and relevancy through real time delivery at the point and time of need. This provides a direct avenue for acquired knowledge and skills to be immediately transferred into the local context
- accessibility as a mindset of persons rather than just an infrastructure issue. It is well documented that providing the best infrastructure does not ensure its use or it being perceived as relevant or accessible.

These approaches ensure that participation with ICT is proactive and provides lifelong learning practices, leadership, mentoring and sharing in a wide profile of domains.

In its experiential, hybrid ICT framework, ODT addresses the need for technology to be voiced in other people's world views, as John Sobol describes:

“The key to overcoming this alienation by using technology is to make depressed (in every sense of the word) people the creators of their own content. Because people can always connect with their own story — the content of their own lives — and if given half a chance can usually say something very deep and moving about it, which is also usually a great shock and source of pride to them. But so long as the internet is seen primarily as a delivery mechanism for other people's ideas of GREAT content as opposed to a place where people learn and grow through sharing their own experiences and knowledge, the problem of disaffected communities who refuse to engage will remain” (*Digitopia Blues – Race, Technology and the American Voice*, Banff Centre Press, 2002).

Inclusive development is essential to the creation of an ODT program, thus avoiding the homogenisation or assimilation of marginal fractions within the community population and to play down the ethnocentric assumptions of technological society in its interaction with distant cultures. In making an ODT program it is essential for all voices to be expressed, for hybridity to function. This occurs through interactive participation within an online story which creates a fictitious drama. The avatar is a character in need, whose life changes direction according to the end users' participation from their many different positions. The story evolves in real time, from a period of weeks to months, developing according to the direction and input of the participants. The participants inevitably introduce problems and issues they and their community are currently dealing with. Hence the story and any associated learning content, addresses and reflects real life. Learning is intrinsic, relevant and can immediately be put in action. Meanwhile, the culmination of this process can be repurposed onto a CD-ROM, which represents a different culture, providing an ongoing learning experience for all. An example of this was Joe's Story <<http://www.joe.cicada.net.au>>.

Joe's Story was delivered over a five-month period targeting those in five remote communities who undertook the role of managing people with spinal injuries (and other disabilities).

The learners were diverse, including Indigenous Allied Health workers, Home and Community Care workers, a Women's Group and individual community members. The communities' local contexts varied, as did their culture (being Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, and with some having had many exogenous groups introduced into their community). Some locations had ICT access and infrastructure others had very little. The level of social dysfunction also differed from one being described as "the most violent place outside of a war zone" (Guinness Book of Records 1999) to a traditional culture acknowledged as a success in the international art market.

For all the communities, the common barriers to learning and using ICT, were their perceptions of the program's:

- relevance to daily living
- inclusiveness and promotion of their family and culture
- accessibility within existing skills, literacy level, life and social patterns
- meaning for the wider group. An Indigenous person's identity is highly interdependent with family and community, and so too, the ICT framework must weave into the needs of the local community and its cultures. At an operational level, local activities such as a night of fighting in the community, impinge on the progress of any program and on the lifespan of the equipment itself.

The elements of ODT, as exemplified in Joe and the subsequent growth of ODT stories representing his fictitious family, are:

- The content of the ICT program, e.g. the CD-ROM, is created by both the end users and the developers, i.e. Cicada
- Multiple characters reinforce a holistic approach, representing extended family and the broader community
- The experts, learners and characters represent diverse cultures and voices
- The fictitious community, Paradalah, represents where the end users live
- Communication between trainers and learners is via emails with visual data delivered through this and other means. This provides real time engagement, dealing with real time life whilst being entertaining and empowering participants, and gives bonding or involvement
- Resources and knowledge are responsively provided as the need to know arises, occurring only after the learners have tried to problem-solve and share ideas together
- This fictitious 'soap' provides a safe space for difficult issues and subjects to be addressed
- The learning is implicit, with participants engaging in entertainment and the trialling of their own ideas (with no loss of face)
- Peer learning and support is integral in establishing lifelong learning practices, resources and mentors

- Content is personalised and meaningful, with teachers and experts becoming characters and personal networkers.

Finally because learners are using technology within a program, ODT promotes ICT infrastructure and skills within developing communities.

The technology that ODT uses is as varied as the cultures it can deliver to, from broadband in Australia and Hong Kong to villages in PNG and Cambodia. The level of reliance on software or human intervention within the delivery process will differ according to all these environments. Flexibility is the fundamental element that allows the theoretical model and processes within the framework to be applied within each culture and set of learning or behavioural goals.

First Mile Solutions have created an operational and technological infrastructure that works with just a computer, a mule (bike or bus) and satellite in a regional centre. Even with this limited access to the Internet, ODT can operate and impact on the participants. Text data can be supplemented with heavy visual and audio data being delivered through many platforms such as TV, print, radio and CD-ROM. Again, it's not the technology as such that must be adhered to, it is the ODT model.

To measure outcomes is always challenging for early stages of innovative programs especially if delivered at a distance into developing communities. User feedback is perhaps the most reliable but there are some skills that can have competencies measured, such as IT skills. However, with such a holistic framework, the learning is not just contained to one individual, rather the ripples from a program can pass through a whole community and can be missed by the objective outsider, that is, the producer or facilitator of such programs. There are always the passive participants who are not necessarily the targeted learner group. This program is about creating change in life rather than delivery of certain expected or prescribed training. If the technology is based in the school, it is likely (as occurred in Lockhart River) that the children will be engaging in the story and it will be them delivering it orally to the targeted learner group, such as the health workers. In this case it's the children who become the facilitators, even the IT champions, and who are ensuring that the knowledge is not only being transferred to the current situation but also integrated in future generations.

“New technologies alter the structure of our interest; the things we think about. They alter the character of our symbols: the things we think with. And they alter the nature of community: the arena in which thoughts develop” (Postman 1993, p. 20).

ODT provides something unique, which every ethnic group responds to; that is, an opportunity to have a safe, private space to explore, make mistakes and to role play without

having to be accountable, take a position and be judged. Storytelling that uses ICT within a culturally appropriate framework provides a platform for users and producers to work within diverse cultures; to address challenging and intimate issues and to transfer knowledge and skills so as to be an agent of change within developing communities.

“...the alternative is the alternative, it is what defends our cultural identities against the transnational homogenisation of culture” (Roncagliolo 1991).

### **Keywords**

ICT, accessibility, online training, interactive media, health

### **References**

Berry D C et al. 1993, *Implicit Learning: Theoretical and Empirical Issues*, Psychology Press, UK.

Hall D 1991, *Video as a Tool for Change: The developments of an International Dialogue and Perspectives on the Use of Video in this Process*, in eds A Ambrosi & N Thede, *Video and the Changing World*, Black Rose Books, Montreal and New York

Hewitson J 1997, *International Guerilla TV – Towards a Millennium Shift*, Griffith University, Brisbane.

Lewis G 1995, 'Theorising intercultural communication Education', *Australian Journal of Communication*, vol. 22, no. 3, pp. 40-51.

Peat M 1997, *Community Based Rehabilitation*, WB Saunders Company Ltd, Australia.

Postman N 1993, *Technopoly. The Surrender of Culture to Technology*, Vintage Books, New York.

Roncagliolo R 1991, 'Notes on "the Alternative"', in eds A Ambrosi & N Thede, *Video and the Changing World*, Black Rose Books, Montreal.

Turner G 1994, *"Making It National" Nationalism and Australian Popular Culture*, Allen and Unwin, Australia

UNESCO 2002, *Open and Distance Learning – Trends, Policy and Strategy Considerations*.