

# Capacity Building Through Community and Government Collaboration

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## Abstract

Tasmanian Communities Online is a network of 66 state government sponsored, community-focussed Online Access Centres across rural and regional Tasmania. The network was first established to provide low-cost access to computers and the Internet as well as one-to-one assistance and training in their use for those most at risk of being disadvantaged by the digital divide.

With strong community ownership and input into the strategic direction along with effective central support and significant financial assistance from the state government, the role of the Online Access Centres has grown to meet the changing needs of each community. Over 60,000 patrons regularly use their local Online Access Centre, making them the social hub of many small communities helping to build and extend social networks across the generations.

The friendly, informal environment of the Online Access Centres make them important sources of 'second-chance' education and training opportunities in many small rural communities as well providing access to government and other online information and support for community capacity building initiatives.

With an average of five volunteers serving on each Centre committee, a major challenge for the network is building their knowledge and understanding of modern governance practices and management skills in an environment where individuals are increasingly faced with competing priorities.

## Keywords

Online Access Centre, education, training, computers, Internet

## Introduction

"ICT [Information and Communication Technologies] can help achieve a community's social, economic, political or cultural goals. Fundamental to this is 'access' to the technology, since without at least minimal access, little can be achieved" (Gurstein 2002).

"Tasmania's future depends in part on how well we embrace the changes in information and communications technologies, and how we choose to participate in the global information society. For the Tasmanian community to become a true information society its members must have ready and equitable access to quality information irrespective of where they live or their ability to afford the latest technology" (Department of Education 2003).

The Tasmanian Communities Online is a network of 66 Online Access Centres (often called telecentres elsewhere) strategically located across rural and regional Tasmania. The program is funded and

managed by the state government's Department of Education through the Tasmanian Communities Online Centre Support Unit. Centres have a strong community focus providing low-cost access to computers and the Internet as well as assistance and training in their use close to where most people live.

Each Centre has at least three modern multimedia computers connected to the Internet with a printer and scanner. Many have other peripherals such as a digital camera, fax machines and photocopiers. Most Online Access Centres open at hours that suit their local community including evenings and weekends and have a paid coordinator, generally part-time, supported by well trained volunteers.

Starting in March 1998, 64 Centres were established over a three-year period utilising Australian Government funding. This strategy to provide communities with access to information and communications technology in a non-threatening environment underpinned a more ambitious strategy to build the market for e-government and e-business, accelerating Tasmania's transition towards an information economy.

The Tasmanian Communities Online network is integral to strategies arising from a number of key state government policy directions including Tasmania Together 2020, Learning Together, Tasmania: A State of Learning, and Informing Tasmanians. Tasmania Together is a social, economic and environmental plan for Tasmania to 2020, based on a shared community vision and administered by an independent board. This plan helps to shape government policy, service delivery and budgets.

Online Access Centres play a key role in helping to achieve a number of the key Tasmania Together goals and benchmarks including making rural communities vital and desirable places to live, enabling access to lifelong education, online information and providing a valued and recognised role for volunteers and youth. The recent partnership formed with the Tasmania Together Partnership Board acknowledges the Online Access Centres' contribution.

Learning Together and the later Tasmania: A State of Learning are two strategic policies that define a clear role for Online Access Centres in assisting people to access 'second chance' education and training opportunities. Online Access Centres provide Tasmanians disadvantaged by geography or personal circumstance with a range of informal basic computer and Internet training opportunities as well as formal and nationally accredited training through partnerships with registered training organisations.

In the information age, access, capability and content are keys to effective use of information. Along with libraries, Informing Tasmanians describes a role for Online Access Centres in providing access to information and in ensuring Tasmanians have the capability required to access and use it. Centres also contribute to online content, showcasing their local businesses, organisations and cultural heritage.

The network has a strong equity focus in addressing the digital divide. Home ownership of computers and Internet in Tasmania is below the national average and well behind levels in the US, Canada and the UK. The 2001 Australian Bureau of Statistics census had Tasmanian home ownership of computers at 29 per cent of households compared with 56 per cent nationally. Further, Internet use in rural Tasmania lagged

significantly behind that of the major population Centres. Of the Online Access Centres, 63 per cent are located in communities with unemployment rates the same or higher than the State average and 86 per cent in areas where the number of people with post school qualifications is below the average. Almost 70 per cent of patrons come from low income households and do not have a computer at home. Many do not have post-secondary school qualifications.

It has been seven years since the first Online Access Centre opened and over 65,000 Tasmanians have used their local Centre, representing approximately 18 per cent of the population living outside of metropolitan Hobart. Over 40,000 Tasmanians have completed a formal training course in basic computer skills through their local Online Access Centre. Many more have received one-to-one assistance in a wide range of tasks including emailing grandchildren, researching family history, producing brochures, uploading TAFE and university assignments, booking an airline ticket or paying a car registration online.

Along with significant in-kind support from the state government, the Australian Government provided each Online Access Centre with an initial two years of seed funding. This financial support was given on the expectation that Centres would become self-sustaining.

Collocation was seen as a key sustainability strategy. All but 12 communities opted to locate their Online Access Centre with a Tasmanian Government school or library, gaining access to rent-free dedicated premises and a shared Internet connection at no cost to the community. This strategy maximised the utilisation of existing infrastructure for the benefit of local communities as well as serving to aggregate services and clients.

In recent years, a policy of further aggregating services in small rural communities has been pursued where opportunities arise and community support for the proposal is forthcoming. In many cases this involves collocation of the Online Access Centre, community library and a vocational training and education facility in the local school as part of refurbishment work. The latest iteration is a purpose-built facility housing these three facilities plus a Centrelink office and Tasmanian Government service counter.

Whilst this collocation strategy offered a measure of self-sustainability for Online Access Centres, Haskell (1999) found that thin markets in small rural communities and the conflict between commercial activity and providing a social service made ongoing financial support critical to the Centres' viability. He found that most small rural communities could be expected to generate between 10 per cent and 20 per cent of their annual operating budgets.

In recognition of the need for ongoing financial support, the Tasmanian Government is now the primary sponsor of the Tasmanian Communities Online network. This ongoing commitment to the network ended the previous funding uncertainty that hampered forward planning and reinforced community and business perceptions that Centres had little capacity for longer-term service delivery. This further undermined their viability.

In 2005–06, the state government will provide over \$2.5 million in grants to Centres and central support to the network. Two initiatives are included into this allocation; the establishment of two Online Access

Centres in communities that were previously ineligible for funding, despite having significantly disadvantaged populations; and an allocation to assist Online Access Centres to provide free access for low-income patrons.

The majority of Centres are managed by a not-for-profit community organisation. To receive funding to establish an Online Access Centre, the community had to be able to demonstrate that the board of the administering organisation was representative of the local community to assist in building strong local ownership for the facility and its services. In many cases, this required the formation of a new organisation, although 16 Centres utilised existing groups with wide membership such as neighbourhood houses and community associations as their parent body.

This strategy of broad community representation in management has meant that centres remain inclusive of all sections of the community. An independent evaluation undertaken in 2003 indicated that over 80 per cent of current and past patrons felt that the Online Access Centres were an important community resource.

However, in many smaller communities the Centre's administrative burden falls upon a relatively limited pool of volunteers. In an environment of increasing public accountability and emphasis on good governance practices, many people feel unable or unwilling to take on employment and financial management responsibilities. Two strategies, the merging of several independent groups into a single management body and an option for the community to take a strong advisory role with Centre administration through the Department of Education have assisted with governance and succession concerns.

In implementing the change from current arrangements, the Centre Support Unit facilitates a community owned consultation and decision making process. In the northeast of the state, five communities have merged their independent organisations to form a single parent body to administer these Centres. A similar arrangement has been adopted by two centres in the Meander Valley. Currently the financial and employment administration of 25 Centres is undertaken by the Department of Education. Through a representative local advisory committee, each community sets the strategic direction of their Centre and oversees its operation.

These new arrangements offer significant benefits to communities. By taking a more regional approach, the North East Centres benefit from reduced management overheads, economies of scale in service delivery and purchasing and greater access to regional funding sources. Many advisory committee members for department-managed Centres have expressed the view that this arrangement has allowed them to concentrate on enhancing service delivery rather than being distracted by more prosaic Centre management issues.

For department-managed Centres collocated with schools, this new arrangement has encouraged cross-generational projects and initiatives further strengthening community bonds and greater lifelong learning opportunities. There are many examples of programs where school students are collaborating with

grandparents or aged home residents to develop websites showcasing local history and heritage or mentoring them in their use of computers and the internet.

Many communities wish to retain the management of their Centre sometimes for the opportunities for community members to develop experience and skills and sometimes because of concerns about losing control and suspicion of bureaucracy. With an average of five volunteers serving on each Centre committee, a major challenge for the network in maintaining service quality is building their knowledge and understanding of modern governance practices and management skills in an environment where individuals are increasingly faced with competing priorities. At a time when there is increased accountability for public funds, this is a priority not only to ensure high quality service delivery but also to minimise the risks for board members of poor practices.

One of the goals of Tasmania Together is to make rural communities vital and desirable places to live. Online Access Centres are not only vital social hubs in their communities but they have provided new careers, interests and life opportunities for many rural and regional Tasmanians. Edwards (2001) points out that it is not just the range of services provided by access to ICT that is important in rural communities but strong local ownership of the facilities helps to build community confidence and capacity.

A few examples are illustrated here:

“Suppose you are working to build on the strengths of the oldest country show in the southern hemisphere — established for 165 years. You want brochures, pamphlets, nametags, as well as publicity in the Midlands Herald. Then the Campbell Town Online Access Centre is the answer. They publish the Midlands Herald as well. The Centre was instrumental in the town winning the national 2004 Can-Do Community Award.”

“Imagine a calendar that showcases beautiful island scenery, a public exhibition over a weekend in July to select the winning photo and attended by almost 70% of the island’s population of 680 people and a group of dedicated volunteers with access to the appropriate equipment and software to get the calendar to professional pre-press standard. The Bruny Island calendar is now in its fourth year with copies sent all over the world. With corporate sponsors providing prizes, competition to have a picture selected is fierce and locals use the Centre to research more about photography. Little wonder that the Online Access Centre is now assisting several local authors to publish several books.”

Online Access Centres have also taken a lead role in maintaining a database of community organisations previously the responsibility of the State Library of Tasmania. The content management system that drives each Centre’s website provided the opportunity for every Tasmanian non-profit community organisation to publish their details on the Web from any computer connected to the Internet.

The automated authentication and update process minimised maintenance overheads with Centres only having to promote the service and assist organisations without Internet access or basic computing skills. Using a ‘collect once, use many times’ philosophy, a localised view of this online database, Tasmania’s CommunityNet, is available on each Centre’s website with customised views provided for a number of

local government websites. A similar publishing model underpins Tasmanian business information and local attractions and events through partnerships with the Department of Economic Development and Tourism Tasmania respectively.

Central to such initiatives are the learning opportunities they provide. Balatti and Falk (2001) argue that community capacity building is not only an outcome of learning but underpins the processes by which learning occurs. Driven by collaborative effort and mostly in informal settings, participants further develop their skills and extend social networks further building individual and community capability in other areas of civic activity.

Constructivist theories of learning are based on the notion that individuals build new knowledge and understanding through integrating new experiences and modifying existing patterns. Brennan (2000) argues that online and computer based education and training delivery provides new opportunities for an individualised approach to learning and collaborative effort. Cross (2004), Ludwig-Hardman and Dunlap (2003) and Tait (2003) all argue that opportunities for social interaction and developing a sense of community are key factors in online and distance learning for maintaining student motivation and increasing the likelihood of course completion. Where they have the opportunity to communicate and interact with others, students feel less isolated; their self-directed learning skills are enhanced and they develop new knowledge and skills in collaboration with their peers and at their own pace.

Online Access Centres are a key facilitator and hub for lifelong learning. Through their local Online Access Centre, people have access to one-on-one assistance with the use of computers and the Internet, informal basic skills training courses. Through a delivery partnership with TAFE Tasmania, Online Access Centre patrons can undertake nationally accredited training in Certificate II in Information Technology and Certificate II in Business. Content is provided through a blended delivery model using both online and more traditional distance education methodologies. Each course has an online TAFE teacher responsible for course content as well as assessment and accreditation. Centres recruit the participants and provide them with local learning support.

The Tasmanian Communities Online experience has been that completion rates of these accredited courses are well above those typically experienced nationally and overseas with distance and online delivery. Critical to their success is the local learner support.

Each Centre has a course facilitator, often a volunteer who has developed their computing skills through the Centre and completed a Train Small Groups qualification. These mentors are highly attuned to the needs of new online learners and are able to encourage and support students. It can often be as simple as helping to solve a problem in uploading an assignment to the learning management system or encouraging students to persist.

“We’re passionate about encouraging people to keep learning. They come in and use the centre to build up their confidence. Sometimes someone will think that they’re not going to make it. We give them a good talking to. Remind them of how much they’ve learned, and give them the extra help they need at that point.” (Anne-Marie — Online Access Centre Coordinator)

Some Centres also support local learning circles to facilitate collaborative approaches to learning and build a sense of belonging to a supportive learning community. Currently these groups are informal with no agreed rationale or shared knowledge underpinning their operation. As one of eight nationally funded projects through the e-Learning Creative Community Partnerships program, the Tasmanian Communities Online network will be undertaking action research in the latter half of 2005 to determine the key factors for learning circle success.

Having the requisite foundation skills are also an important factor in course completion. Centres recruit participants who have these skills, or can develop them with some individualised skill gap remediation. Most will have previously completed a basic skills course through the Centre or developed their skills as long-term patron. This pathway into accredited training is particularly effective for the disadvantaged or those that have been out of formal education for a significant period.

Also important is the opportunity to apply learned skills and knowledge in a workplace context. Working as a volunteer in the Online Access Centre is an inherent component of these courses, providing Centres with a ready pool of volunteers and course participants with work experience in their local community.

An email discussion list, two regional coordinator meetings each year, a comprehensive online help kit, and access to a centrally brokered Certificate IV in Workplace Training and Assessment ensure that Centres are well supported in their course delivery. The Centre Support Unit has also brokered a multi-site licence for industry-standard training resource software, providing the capacity to customise and tailor high-quality ICT training materials to individual needs with minimum effort.

Cross (2004) argues that in Australia, policy and funding is focussed on structured education and training with a strong focus on work outcomes. This emphasis often overlooks the other personal, civic and health benefits that derive from engaging in informal learning and disenfranchises the most vulnerable in our society. Many of the disadvantaged have few of the foundation skills required to successfully engage in more formal and structured education and training. The structured learning of institutions, pre-packaged courses, set times and predefined learner-teacher roles present yet more barriers to the disadvantaged. Informal and unstructured learning opportunities are essential to reengage the disadvantaged in learning.

Online Access Centres play a vital role in empowering the disadvantaged, presenting them with flexible options and helping them to overcome barriers. With the majority of Centres located in communities with levels of employment and post school qualifications well below the state average, Online Access Centres are well placed to assist patrons to develop basic skills at their own pace in an informal and unstructured atmosphere, building their confidence in their capacity to learn and to pursue more formal and structured education and training. They place the learner and their individual needs at the centre with the staff and volunteers facilitating and assisting, rather than directing.

Central coordination and facilitation has been identified as one of the key success factors in supporting Online Access Centre type facilities and assisting in further building community capacity (Haskell 1999; Department of Education 2003). The Department of Education's Centre Support Unit provides the

interface between government and the communities administering an Online Access Centre. The Unit manages the grant program, provides field support, brokers regional and network wide services and assists in building a community of practice across the network of Online Access Centres.

A formal service review process is a key factor in ensuring high quality service provision across the network. The review is designed to assist Centres to measure progress against their annual plan and budget and begins with a self assessment by the Centre committee and staff. This is followed by a discussion with a Centre Support Unit officer and a written agreement on achievements and matters requiring attention.

The Centre Support Unit's facilitation and coordination role provides significant economy of scale benefits and in maintaining high levels of service quality across the network. A single point of contact for contracted services such as training provision reduces Centre overheads and builds confidence in the network. Significant financial and volunteer time savings have been achieved by providing Centres with a centrally managed computer and software replacement program.

Providing oversight to the network is the 11-member voluntary body, the Tasmanian Communities Online Advisory Board. Members are appointed by the Minister for Education and represent Centre committees, the general community, local government and education and training providers. Most recently the board has considered and endorsed a revised Online Access Centre funding model that better recognises the service differentials based on population size, socio-economic disadvantage and geographic isolation as well as a new services delivery framework.

The new framework provides clear directions for the Centres to forward plan with a business case only being required for activities that fall outside of the agreed scope. This requirement allows Centres to remain innovative and entrepreneurial whilst minimising the risk of unsuccessful ventures, unproductive competition and service duplication. These arrangements are enshrined in a formal agreement between the state government and the community.

Online Access Centres are a vital resource in rural and regional Tasmania in providing not only equitable access to information and communication technology but also enhancing life opportunities and building community capacity. In providing computer and Internet access and training in their use, Online Access Centres have become a local hub for education, training and online information, building the capacity of local communities to undertake new initiatives and projects. The strong role of the Tasmanian Government in supporting the network has ensured the long-term viability of the Centres and their continued development to meet key strategic outcomes for local communities and Tasmania as a whole.

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