

LEADING RICH MEDIA IMPLEMENTATION COLLABORATIVELY: MOBILISING INTERNATIONAL, NATIONAL AND BUSINESS EXPERTISE

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a project underway across the Australian higher education sector to investigate the sustainability, viability and scalability of rich media technologies. A professional community has oversight for the project and its outcomes and this community includes international colleagues and members of the business community who will, respectively, act as reference and evaluation groups and assist with financial modeling.

KEYWORDS

Videoconferencing, rich media technologies, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

The Leading Rich Media project proposes to develop the capacity of key stakeholders within the higher education sector in Australia to utilise rich-media technologies such as videoconferencing, Access Grid and media streaming to enhance teaching and learning of diverse cohorts of students. This purpose will be fulfilled by developing a multi-faceted professional community in Australian universities. Further, professional development modules will be developed online for use across the sector and establishing an annual professional forum.

By establishing a multi-faceted professional community comprising staff identified within universities and related organisations, the project will become the foundation for ongoing collaborative action beyond the life of the project. Expertise has been identified in staff whose responsibilities include a) technical: those who manage rich-media technologies, b) teaching and learning: those who promote rich-media technologies within centralised teaching and learning centres as well as staff who use rich-media technologies in their practice, c) administration: financial officers and IT infrastructure administrators within institutions, and d) staff in related national and international organisations.

The central aim of the project is to contribute to improved teaching and learning outcomes and increased institutional efficiency and effectiveness. We will do this by providing frameworks for decision-making about the use of rich-media technologies which will be applicable to its use in learning, teaching, administration and research.

This project is being led by staff from three universities (University of New England, University of Queensland, University of Wollongong) on behalf of the sector. All 38 universities have been invited to provide information and contact persons so that each institution will have similar opportunities to contribute to and benefit from the outcomes of the project. To date more than half of these institutions have responded positively to an invitation to participate and others from New Zealand have requested to join. The team sees this as an indication that the project is relevant and timely.

2. PROJECT OUTCOMES

This project intends to achieve 2 multifaceted outcomes:

1. Investigate, promote and provide frameworks for strengthening learning and teaching when engaging with and using rich-media technologies by building on emerging corporate research by acknowledged analysts of unified rich-media technologies *Wainhouse Research* (Davis & Weinstein, 2005) and *ServicePoint Australia*;
2. Form an Australian professional community to connect, engage and contribute to a key international community of expertise, The Dutch Webstroom Community, SURFNet (Netherlands) and JISC (UK), and work with key corporate associations such as Wainhouse, ServicePoint and AARNet for the purpose of forming a multi-faceted group capable of initiating and supporting sustained change across the sector.

The exciting and complementary aspect of the project is the connection of Australian professional community with equivalent international partners JISC (UK) and SURFNet (Netherlands) through Mediastroom. Both organisations have registered support of the project by agreeing to participate in the reference group and evaluation panel and this has generated much excitement in engaging with an international network of experts.

In order to ensure the comprehensiveness of the project key business associates with expertise in rich media technologies will be engaged to develop scalable, sustainable business models. The rapid uptake of rich-media technologies in the corporate sector and implementation of integrated solutions by major software vendors such as *Microsoft*, means that these communications media are increasingly available to students in their personal and professional lives. It is critical that the sector responds in effective ways. Technology merely opens possibilities: the outcomes are dependent on decisions made.

Thus, the project is intentionally multi-faceted because it seeks to inform and support:

- strategic decision-making in institutions and the sector;
- innovation of pedagogies;
- effective implementation of rich-media technologies and related infrastructures;
- a range of teaching and learning contexts including small class collaborations, “niche” courses, cross-institutional programs, industry-university teaching collaborations, etc.

3. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT

As student cohorts change, technologies push forward and institutions rush to meet the demands placed on them, it is important that learning and teaching is not compromised as the imperative to keep-up raises the profile of rich-media technologies. The use of videoconference technologies, in particular, has been beset by many failures and is oft abandoned after initial poor experiences. Thus, this project proposes to review emerging trends and provide ways in which universities across Australia might pursue sustainable, scaleable and pedagogical frameworks in the use of rich-media technologies.

This project fills two gaps currently identified in the higher education sector in Australia. Firstly, no comprehensive investigation of rich-media technologies which integrates pedagogical and administrative uses, sustainability and scalability across the sector is published for Australia. Secondly, there is no community of expertise that has rich media as its focus. Currently, the expert stakeholders comprise disparate, isolated technicians, academic and administrative staff, commonly without collective voice within institutions and the sector as a whole. As a disparate group, their expertise and collective knowledge is isolated within pockets in institutions and, therefore, ineffectually utilised across the sector. This project is significant because it promotes an evidence-based change management approach to developing a strategic position from which the sector can move confidently forward from the baseline established by the AARNet survey (AARNet Pty Ltd, 2006). This project demonstrates strategic leadership across the sector and within institutional layers by contributing to sector understandings of the business efficiencies and pedagogical potential of rich-media technologies. The international and business partners represent key organisations with whom future potential relationships will benefit the sector. This has not been achieved before.

In order for change generated by this project to be ongoing, the dissemination of project outputs is critical because barriers from prior poor experiences and lack of understanding of the technology abound across the

sector. Already, the professional community, has developed and will maintain a comprehensive project website designed around a wiki for use by all members of the higher education community. Business experts have been engaged to analyse sector practices and propose models for scalability and sustainability to meet the needs of business managers and policy makers within institutions who need quality information. Through this wiki, the project team intends to connect practices with the wider community and therefore contribute to international developments in the use of rich media technologies.

4. PROJECT METHODOLOGY

Given the generalised failure of educational change initiatives over the last 30 years (Fullan, 1997, 1998a, 1998b), the aims of this project have a strong basis in educational change theory and practice. The project uses Sergiovanni's (1998) concept of the 'professional community' as its conceptual framework because his notions of community encapsulate the values required for success: expertise, collegiality, professional obligations, norms and conduct to leverage deep and enduring change. The mediating variables which are critical to mobilising the sector for change are the shared knowledge and expertise of a) the stakeholders who will form the professional community and b) the staff in universities and partner institutions. In order to operationalise this proposal the project leaders will need to assume the role of integrators in the Competing Values Framework (Figure 1.) devised from the substantial body of work in management literature, most recently by Vilkinas and Cartan (2006). The project leaders will oversee the project and its output from this perspective in order to establish a functioning professional community which can support sustained change. Thus, their roles will include aspects of each of the elements within the four foci: people, task, external and internal.

A longitudinal approach for quantitative and grey data will extend on existing AARNet data while a comparative case study approach will frame the methods used to highlight the issues identified in project and, therefore, to maximise the output of the project and the expansion of rich media technologies across the sector. The CVF framework provides one lens from which to monitor the processes underpinning the methodology. It is being used actively by the project leaders who are diarising their activities so that they can reflect on the appropriateness of their actions as the project proceeds.

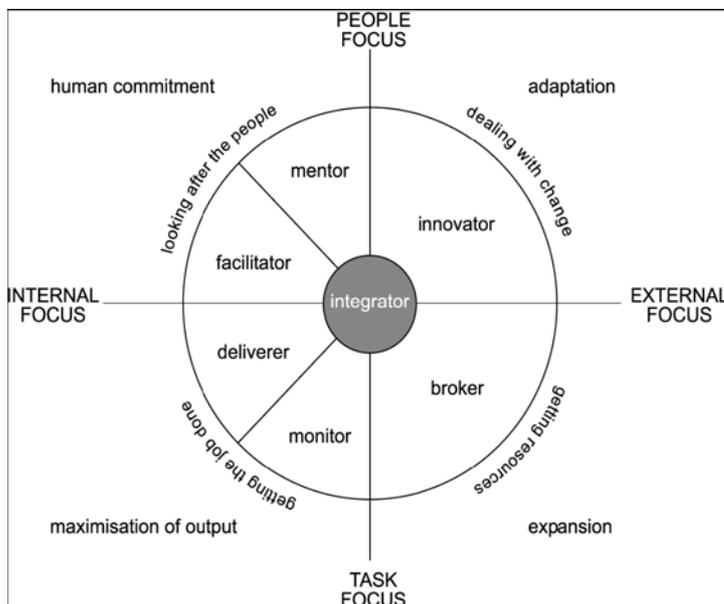


Figure 1. CVF framework (Vilkinas & Cartan 2006)

The success of the project depends on the project leaders maximising their roles as integrators by demonstrating the human commitment, adaptation and maximisation of output described in the CVF model as:

- a) looking after the people;
- b) dealing with change;
- c) getting the job done;
- d) getting resources.

5. CONCLUSION

To date, this methodology is serving the team well and effectively enabling them to keep the project on track and meeting its goals. The team is excited that so many universities have expressed interest in participating and so data collection will be underway shortly. Interest in the project has demonstrated the need for this work and the conclusions will be widely disseminated. Evaluation of the project will be undertaken by external colleagues from SURF which goes in part to ensure international engagement with the project. A budget line dedicated to evaluation emphasises the project leaders' requirement for a worthy and reliable report.

The project leaders look forward to further interest and collaboration and hope that others reading this paper may make contact with the authors.

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