Cybercells

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Project Title	Cybercells: Enhancing Academic and Social Support of Teachers and Adult Community Members in Two Remote Communities in Western Australia
Project Team	Professor Sue Trinidad, Mrs Tania Broadley (SiMERR WA)
Period	2007
Funding Agency	SiMERR
Organisational Base	SiMERR WA

Description

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This project aimed to enhance the academic and social support of teachers and adult community members in regional and remote communities through the use of Cybercells – virtual and actual groups linked by Telecentres and purpose built software. The participants were teachers and adult community members from five communities in Western Australia: two located in the remote northwest of WA, and a further three from agricultural and mining communities throughout the midwest and southern coast. The project had a particular focus on supporting educators who are responsible for the education of school-aged youth in science and mathematics. The SiMERR WA project team supported teachers and adult community members as they engaged in learning about, planning for, and implementing the use of the Telecentre.

Project activities included:

Stage 1: Investigating the current practices and issues of remote and regional teachers, parents, and community members for academic and social support.

From February – June 2007, site visits to three remote Telecentres and schools were made to undertake a needs assessment and ascertain equipment restrictions/requirements. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were designed to elicit the perceived issues faced by community members for academic and social support, due to remoteness. An interview guide was designed to establish consistency across the very unique research sites. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed for analysis.

Stage 2: Develop and validate the use of Cybercells for academic and social support through Telecentres.

In order to form the Cybercells, a software evaluation was carried out by the researchers. These data were collected by conducting a review of current literature, informal interviews with colleagues who had experienced the software and undertaking trials of software applications.

Stage 3: Develop guidelines for using Cybercells and transposing into other Telecentres.

Data within this stage were collected from November – December, 2007. Six separate trials of Cybercells were conducted using the selected software (Elluminate Live). A further four Telecentres were invited to trial the Cybercells within this stage and participated in the Elluminate Live sessions. Technical issues were noted and formed part of the guidelines used to transpose the concept into other Telecentres.

Participants

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The 16 research participants were located within five regional and remote locations of Western Australia. These included Telecentre co-ordinators (5), Regional Co-ordinators (2), principals (3), teachers (5) and other community members (1).

Findings

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Teachers working in remote and regional areas often experience a strong sense of geographic and social isolation from peers, colleagues and appropriate support mechanisms due to the huge distances between towns and communities. Findings from this research indicate the importance of access to professional development, access to resources, the importance of leadership, and a community of practice to support social and academic needs. While many teachers believed their schools offered sufficient access to information and communication technology (ICT); parents of school age children considered the Telecentre to be a successful initiative toward developing connections for the wider community. The use of Cybercells was found to facilitate an opportunity to provide quality academic and social support for those who live in

remote and regional areas to help overcome the limitations to professional learning. This research into the use of Cybercells in this project has illustrated that advances in technology allow for the possibility to lessen the isolation factor felt by many regional and remote communities. There is enormous potential for such web collaboration software like Elluminate Live which can link communities virtually to bring about significant change for people living in rural communities of Western Australia.

Outcomes

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Published refereed papers

- Broadley, T., & Trinidad, S. (2008, in press). Web Collaboration and cybercells: Using an innovative approach to connect rural communities. In The face of learning (Proceedings of the annual conference of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia).
- Trinidad, S., & Broadley, T. (2008, in press). Connect and collaborate: Professional learning within a web collaboration environment in remote Western Australia. Proceedings of the Australian Council for Computers in Education (ACEC).

Conference presentations

- Broadley, T., & Trinidad, S. (2008, August). Web Collaboration and cybercells: Using an innovative approach to connect rural communities. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia, Melbourne, Vic.
- Trinidad, S., & Broadley, T. (2008, October). Connect and collaborate: Professional learning within a web collaboration environment in remote Western Australia. Paper presented at the annual conference of the Australian Council for Computers in Education, Canberra, ACT.

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The findings of this project have illustrated that advances in technology allow for the possibility to lessen the isolation factor felt by many regional and remote communities. While challenges were encountered with setting up the Cybercells the successes clearly outweigh the technical issues experienced. Participants were able to see many applications for using such technology in the future. This study was initially designed to trial Cybercells between two remote communities, however, due to a willingness to participate, a further four communities became involved in the trial of the Cybercells software. This indicates a need for improved access to more affordable and reliable broadband services to ensure students, parents, teachers and the wider community can communicate at ease with others across the state. The government needs to be able to support telecommunications for all Western Australians wherever they are situated in this vast state.

Related documents

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