Knowledge Bank 2006 Online Conference: stories from teaching in the digital age

Conference wrap-up

‘This is the first time I’ve ever been involved in this type of online interaction. It has been great! I can’t wait to tell our staff about it. Thanks everyone.’

‘Learning new ideas, being able to read participants experiences, obtaining website resources, and being able to listen to sessions while working on other tasks at my desk.’

‘While we were physically far apart, there was a palpable sense of being there with other people and we could share what we are learning and doing with one another.’

These are just a few of the comments captured from the Knowledge Bank 2006 Online Conference evaluation, and typify the experience for the overwhelming majority of the almost 700 conference participants. The conference ran for three days in October. Twelve sessions were presented using a unique web-conferencing platform, Elluminate live, which enabled participants to ‘attend’ and participate in the sessions of their choice from their PCs or laptops.

This article presents information on the sessions and the main research themes that emerged, then reports on the main findings from the conference evaluation.

Conference sessions and research themes

This section provides a broad survey of the salient features that emerged from the 12 ‘live’ conference sessions.

A major development that came to light from the three days of networking was the prominence of Web 2.0 tools, such as podcasts, blogs and wikis, and the impact they are having on teaching and learning. A stream of conference sessions was devoted to this field and included ‘What is this thing called podcasting’, ‘Is podcasting history?’ and ‘Podagogy’.

These technologies and their associated practices are transforming how learning occurs, and are also affecting, in surprisingly novel ways, the nature of the teacher/student relationship. These reflections from Andrew Douch, about the impact of his podcasts, illustrate this development.

‘Kids don’t have to be just in my class to be learning from me. Kids from other Biology classes listen. Kids from other schools listen. There are even kids from other countries who are listening.’

and

‘In my experience, these technologies don’t take extra time. In fact it’s quite the reverse. In the past, a fortnight before exams, I would be spending every spare period helping students. Now I don’t do that. Instead I create some digital content that all the kids are asking about and they can all benefit from it. To me it is the difference between analogue and digital teaching. In the past, 50 minutes of teaching=50 minutes of instruction. If you wanted to give more instruction to the kids it required more time. I used to run lunchtime classes for example. I don’t run lunchtime classes any more. Now my teaching is digital, 50 minutes of teaching=many hours of instruction because kids can listen over and over at the times that they are most receptive.’
These examples also show how students are learning in both the formal classroom and in ‘networked worlds’.

Keynote speaker, Nancy White, presented ‘The eight competencies of online interaction’. She explored how the defining characteristics of these ‘collaborative learning spaces’ compel educators to identify a set of skills and dispositions more suited to the fluid, dynamic, and often exploratory nature of the online world. Her session left participants to ponder the question: to what extent can we live with uncertainty and ambiguity?

Responses to this question were provided in two sessions, ‘A leadership perspective on knowledge sharing and networking’ and in the first part of ‘ICT peer coaching and facilitating pedagogical change in school clusters’.

In the former, Sharon Adams from the Department of Education’s Gippsland Regional Office discussed the challenges, unexpected outcomes and benefits that have flowed from her experiences facilitating a ‘leadership network’. The stories Sharon told about developing and sustaining this network gave clear expression to Nancy White’s notion of living with ‘uncertainty’ and ‘ambiguity’. In the latter session, Ernie Pietsch, from the Kew Cluster, also spoke about the often ‘unpredictable’ nature of a networks development.

As networks continue to grow, it has become apparent that there is a need to know more about the social dynamics of a network, especially how network members relate with one another. Understanding how knowledge is created and distributed within a network is also critical.

The session ‘Knowledge sharing and social networking’ focused on how people interact and learn in an online community, using an example of a networking analysis tool that helps illuminate the often obscure world of internal network relationships and alliances. While tools such as these are instructive, the pivotal role of a dynamic network moderator cannot be underestimated. The second part of this presentation focused on personalised learning environments and the ways that these can be developed and modified to create social networking opportunities. A range of networking options was discussed, together with tips and tools to help a network facilitator maintain a vibrant sense of ‘community’.

With the widespread recognition that the online teaching world throws up some unique professional development challenges, a number of sessions explored how capacity building and digital skill acquisition is being addressed in our schools. Sessions with this focus included: ‘Changing teacher practice in the digital classroom’; ‘ICT based facilitation and thinking for primary students’; and ‘ICT peer coaching and facilitating pedagogical change in school clusters’.

Some of the most striking aspects of these sessions were the approaches being used to methodically integrate digital technologies with professional development in the ‘life-world’ of the classroom. In other words, the location for the learning was the classroom itself - not some outside venue - and the notion of the ‘outside expert’ has been superseded by teacher-to-teacher capacity building.

Virtual classrooms are becoming more commonplace, but the physically-defined classroom is likely to retain its central importance in schools for some time yet. But what happens when walls are removed and computers are added? In the session, ‘Learning Neighbourhoods’, Janet Di Pilla described the bold experiment underway at Gisborne Secondary College.

Gisborne Secondary College is developing and implementing a shift from teaching in the traditional classroom, to teams of teachers working with up to 120 students in open, flexible learning spaces. This change is focused on Years 7 and 8, with a trial ‘neighbourhood’ underway, and a large rebuilding program about to commence.
‘It’s given us a lot more space if people want to work individually, and we have a lot of room for group work. The class has a set of wireless laptops and the kids really enjoy using them because they can move them around the room, or sit on the floor with them, or whatever!’

As this session demonstrated, even a seemingly straightforward act, such as removing classroom walls, brings with it significant challenges, and benefits, for teacher and student alike.

Every conference needs an ‘agent provocateur’ and in ‘Digifutures’, Leigh Blackall outlined his philosophy for education. He argued that to successfully live and learn in the digital age we need to turn much of our old thinking about learning and education on its head. Leigh puts the ‘connected learner’ at the front and centre of his decentralised networked world, and he believes that a key function of education institutions and central governments should be to remove current barriers and restrictions, as these run contrary to the philosophy of the ‘openness’ of the web.

Finally, Bryce Ives, General Manager of radio station SYN.FM, spoke about the range of school programs run by the station for students and teachers, with the emphasis on engaging students to participate in out-of-school experiences in the media.

His session, the last of the conference, was in many ways a fitting end, as his astute observations about the impact of the digital technologies, such as the ipod; ‘a whole new model of content consumption and distribution,’ the borderless media world with its ‘multiple platforms and user-generated content’, helped to pinpoint key aspects of the transformed world that our students now live in.

**Conference evaluation: key findings**

- Participants assessed the Knowledge Bank 2006 Online Conference as providing a strong professional development platform.
- The conference was seen as providing a sound grounding in providing skills that could be applied within the workplace (88% aggregate agreement – ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’) and a springboard for participants to further grow their skill base (94%).
- With regard to networking, most participants indicated that the conference provided a robust and useful forum for increasing professional networks.
- Respondents provided a number of views in relation to the ‘best’ aspects of the Knowledge Bank 2006 Online Conference, including:
  - the accessibility of the online mode
  - the exposure to new ideas and access to practical experiences.
- A variety of ideas and suggestions were put forward in relation to future content and format, with a call for consideration of after-hours sessions.
- ‘High interest’ topics for future conferences included ‘researching and innovation showcases’ and ‘resources for online teaching and learning’.
- *Elluminate* live, the interactive web-conferencing platform used to deliver the sessions, was viewed favourably overall and endorsed as being both ‘easy to use’ and a ‘good tool to present online content’.

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