Towards a virtual learning community: Building a professional development website for the AMEP

Abstract

This article describes a research project conducted by the National Centre for English Language Teaching and Research (NCELTR) which investigated the use of the Internet for professional development purposes in the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) and highlights key issues that emerged from the project. In particular, the article outlines the way in which a collaborative and research-based approach was used to build a professional development website by engaging potential users not only in the identification of their needs but also in evaluating or testing the pilot website. The needs analysis and evaluation data collected at different phases of the project are discussed with reference to current literature on online learning and professional development.

Introduction

In an analysis of the impact of new technology on education and the creation of learning communities, Jonassen et al (1998) comment that:

A breakthrough has come in the form of the Internet and networking technologies. The Internet, particularly the World Wide Web, has become more than a source for retrieving archived information; it has become the medium that connects scattered people and resources together.

As the largest national Adult TESOL program in Australia, the AMEP provides a good example of the ‘scattered people and resources’ referred to above. With 29 providers delivering programs through approximately 70 education institutions or centres (as well as through distance learning and home-based tutoring initiatives), the AMEP lends itself to an exploration of the potential of technology-based professional development strategies.

This article will first describe the context of a research project undertaken to investigate the use of the Internet for professional development purposes in the AMEP. It will then describe how potential user needs were identified and briefly discuss the issues involved in providing professional development in an online environment. Some implications for future research and development will also be indicated.
Background

The investigation into the potential of an AMEP website to meet the needs of a diverse range of providers was undertaken in the context of major structural changes to AMEP program delivery arrangements. At the time the project was undertaken in 1998, the competitive tendering of the AMEP had resulted in an increase in the number of providers and the entry of new providers into the Program, many of them as part of consortium arrangements. These new providers, some of whom were new to AMEP delivery, came in the shape of adult and community education centres, private TESOL/ELICOS colleges, University providers and TAFE Institutes. The research project thus offered the opportunity to draw both former and newer providers together into a collaborative learning framework of mutual interest, a well established feature of previous AMEP project arrangements (see Burns, this issue).

The use of information technology in the AMEP also figured prominently on the educational policy agenda. NCELTR, the agency responsible at the time for servicing the national research and professional development needs of the AMEP, had started a review or a ‘stocktake’ of the way in which a central agency might meet the needs of the new AMEP delivery arrangements in the twenty-first century. The use of information technology was one of the key strategic components of this review. In this context, two earlier NCELTR research projects had investigated the role of information technology in the AMEP (Corbel 1996, 1998). These projects had recommended using the Internet for professional development purposes and specifically setting up a ‘unique’ AMEP website reflecting the needs of its stakeholders.

The implications of new technology for teaching and learning had already begun to be explored in many AMEP classrooms and the present project was initiated against a backdrop of increasing interest in the role of computer-mediated learning. Growing numbers of teachers were experimenting with software packages for teaching English language skills, and others were introducing their students to web-based learning resources and multi-media products. Interest in web-based professional development was also growing amongst public sector AMEP providers who were being exposed to flexible delivery models in the national vocational education and training sectors. A number of providers were participating in Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) funded staff development projects which used web-based technology to support workplace-based action learning projects. The two major initiatives at the time were *Framing the Future* (http://www.tafe.sa.edu.au/institutes/para/ftf/) and *Learnscope* (http://www.learnscope.anta.gov.au/)

Project aims and methodology

At the beginning of the project, information about the project’s aims was
distributed to all AMEP providers and a group of provider representatives was established to support the implementation. These representatives proved to be invaluable links for disseminating information about the project and promoting interest in project activities.

**Aims**

The project aims were to:

- investigate the use of the internet for professional development purposes in the AMEP
- establish a professional development website for the AMEP
- identify and trial a sample of interactive events to support networking and collaboration across the AMEP
- evaluate the website functions.

Underpinning the twelve-month project was the overall goal of using a collaborative approach to create a group of advocates for the AMEP website and to build user interest in it.

**Project phases**

The project was undertaken in four phases:

Phase 1: Researching user needs

Phase 2: Developing, building, testing and maintaining the website

Phase 3: Planning, implementing and evaluating pilot online learning communities

Phase 4: Promotion and evaluation.

**Methodology**

The project methodology involved a number of key components:

- dissemination of information about the project across all providers
- investigation of potential user needs and priorities, issues and concerns through forums, individual interviews and questionnaires
- involvement of AMEP providers in the trialling and evaluation of the site
- researching the literature and a range of websites for their potential to offer models for the AMEP site.

This article will focus on the first two phases of the project which involved researching user needs and using the results of this research as a basis for developing the AMEP professional development website.
Researching user needs

A major consideration for the development of any new product or service is the gathering of information about user needs, preferences and interests. While the existing NCELTR Online website had developed a range of web pages to meet the increasing interest in ESL online resources in the mid 1990s, there was no data available concerning the relevance and utility of these web pages to an AMEP audience. It was therefore important to obtain an informed picture of an AMEP user group’s interest in the possible functions and content areas for a dedicated AMEP website.

The initial research phase of the project involved a national survey of AMEP staff which was designed to produce a snapshot of potential user needs. This took the form of a questionnaire and focus groups conducted at national AMEP forums, individual interviews and conversations as well as regular e-mail and telephone contact with nominated representatives from AMEP provider organisations.

The questionnaire aimed to elicit the following information from respondents:

❖ location of access to an Internet connection
❖ skills in using the Internet
❖ use of the Internet for teaching or work-related purposes
❖ participation in any online professional development activity
❖ knowledge or use of the current NCELTR Online website
❖ potential usefulness or interest of website content/function areas for the proposed AMEP website
❖ useful existing websites for an AMEP teacher audience
❖ areas or topics of personal professional interest.

Results of the survey

Internet access

Twenty-seven of the 29 AMEP providers participated in the questionnaire. A total of 372 responses were received. Although the responses to the questionnaire represented a self-selected sample of about 30 per cent of the total target audience, the data nevertheless provided the project team with a useful starting point for the development of the website and its content. Analysis of the responses to the questions relating to Internet usage and access, while not conclusive, provided some insights into the extent and use of the new technologies across the AMEP providers. The data relating to Internet access and usage in the AMEP are presented in Table 1.
Table 1: Location of Internet access

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of Internet access</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Home</th>
<th>Library</th>
<th>Other</th>
<th>Nil response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of Respondents</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In interpreting these figures, however, it should be noted that the relatively low percentage for Internet access at work locations was affected by NSW data, where the major providers had not at the time finalised arrangements for Internet connections at their education centres. Responses by states other than NSW ranged between 65 per cent and 100 per cent for Internet connection at the workplace.

Internet skill levels

Table 2 below summarises participant responses to teachers’ self-rating of Internet skill levels. Although 30 per cent classified their skills as fair or good, the responses suggested that a substantial number of AMEP teachers considered themselves relative beginners in Internet use.

Table 2: Self-rating of Internet skill levels by AMEP staff

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill level</th>
<th>Nil</th>
<th>Basic</th>
<th>Fair</th>
<th>Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of respondents</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Preferred website activities

In response to the question concerning possible activities and information for the website the following categories emerged as those most favoured for an AMEP professional development website:

- Australian learning resources
- Online short courses
- Assessment and moderation
- Professional reading material and sources
- Information about conferences and courses
- Interactive teacher forums and networks across Australia
- Information about similar programs overseas.
**Teacher use of the Internet**

A sizeable number (45 per cent) of respondents indicated they were using the Internet for work and/or teaching-related purposes. However, the survey questions did not distinguish between e-mail or website use, so it was not possible to determine whether the purpose was primarily for communication or for professional or student-related research and resources.

**Sites most frequently visited**

The sites most favoured by participants were media related (the ABC and major Australian newspapers), and tourism and cultural (state government tourism sites and museums and libraries), the Virtual ILC (Independent Learning Centre) sponsored through Adult Multicultural Education Services Victoria, and the international and long-established Dave's ESL Café. A very small number of participants (ten per cent) indicated some experience in online professional development activity. Sixteen per cent of respondents had visited the existing NCELTR website, most often to find information about research.

**User profiles**

The survey data, along with other information emerging from discussions with AMEP providers, suggested that the profile of the potential user groups may have changed under the new arrangements. Analysis of the survey responses indicated a renewed interest in topics related to settlement, perhaps reflecting a body of teachers in the program who were new to the AMEP. In this regard, the interest areas nominated by participants in the questionnaire included teaching new arrivals, teaching refugees, trauma and torture, and syllabus design for new arrivals. At the same time, however, there was also a core of extremely experienced AMEP professionals who were seeking to maintain and extend their skills and knowledge in areas such as second language acquisition, cross-cultural communication, assessment, and technology-assisted language learning.

The notion of a ‘one size fits all’ professional development model was thus clearly not one that was appropriate in the post-tendering period.

It was clear, then, that one of the many challenges facing the project would be to determine how the new technology could address such a diversity of interests and needs. The survey responses and conversations with practitioners did provide some clues as to how this might happen, however. Many respondents expressed a strong interest in exploring how they could use various forms of online learning to update their skills and knowledge. At the same time, the desire to communicate with others in the field was strongly voiced. Teachers wanted to find out what others were doing and to learn from them, as well as getting access to current information and resources in the field.

These needs had to be taken into account and built into the website design.
Potential benefits of online technologies

As well as data collected through the questionnaire, perceptions of how the use of the new technologies might benefit the AMEP were explored through targeted discussion at AMEP national forums and thirty-five individual interviews with AMEP practitioners.

A number of potential benefits of using online technologies in the AMEP were identified in these discussions and interviews. These included:

- improved and immediate access to resources
- enhanced contact for more isolated professionals within the AMEP
- increased individual autonomy over access to information and resources
- increased interaction across Australia (that is, using communicative tools such as chat rooms and online delivery of professional development activities)
- flexibility
- currency of information and resources.

Two dominant themes were highlighted in the discussions of the benefits of the ‘anytime/anyplace technology’ represented by the Internet (Graves 2000): the capacity of the new technology to support individual professional development needs, as well as its capacity to connect and link teachers in spite of place and time. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

Autonomy in professional development

The potential of the new technology to give individuals more control or power over meeting their own professional development needs featured prominently in the survey responses and consultations. Respondents mentioned the benefits of individual access to professional development resources, particularly for new teachers. The immediacy of access to resources and information was seen as a real bonus, and applied across both smaller AMEP provider organisations as well as the decentralised sites of the larger AMEP providers. While all informants valued the role and services of professional development units within their own organisations, some also suggested that the new technologies might open up access to information and to professional development resources which had traditionally been managed and disseminated through professional development units. This issue of ownership of professional development is addressed by Owston (1998) in his research into Internet-based teacher development and will be taken up further on in this article.
**Breaking down barriers**

The potential benefit of educational technology as a means of breaking down the barriers of distance and location was frequently raised by respondents. The days of large-scale gatherings of AMEP teachers across states and territories had long gone and new regional providers were keen to find a mechanism that would support their professional development needs. In this context, the opportunity to communicate electronically with others across different states and territories was considered a potential benefit of the new technology, especially since working in a collaborative mode with others in action learning research teams had become an established feature of some national AMEP projects (see Burns, this issue).

Apart from their potential to overcome geographical distances, informants also identified online activities as a way of breaking down barriers inadvertently created by the competitive AMEP program delivery tendering processes. The post-tendering environment was a factor that could have seriously affected the viability of the project. When the project began, it was apparent that within the AMEP there were now ‘new kids on the block’, along with changed management structures and new business arrangements. There was consequently a sense of cautiousness about protocols and procedures for collaborating across providers. However, AMEP teachers have traditionally valued the sharing of ideas as an important aspect of professional development (Burns, this issue) and in spite of the new competitive environment, teachers were very keen to connect and collaborate with others, irrespective of the political and economic environments in which they operated.

**Potential concerns with online technologies**

While a number of potential benefits in using the Internet for professional development were identified for the project, teachers and program managers also expressed some reservations. Some of these were logistical concerns, while others were of a more philosophical nature. These concerns are outlined briefly below.

**Teacher time**

Time constraints were seen to be one of the main factors affecting the viability of online professional development. Concerns were raised as to how teachers would find the time to use the Internet, given that their work in the AMEP already involves both face-to-face and non face-to-face components, including assessment planning, resource development, student support and faculty meetings. Many respondents felt that using the Internet would place a heavy strain on their existing workload.

**Access to the Internet at work**

At the time of the investigation, not all AMEP providers had Internet
connections at their centres. In addition, even those centres that did have connections did not necessarily have individual terminals for teachers. This made access difficult for many teachers who wanted to participate in online professional development.

**Teacher skill standards for the new technologies**

One view presented during the consultations was that the AMEP needed to establish teacher skill standards for the new technologies (see Corbel 1998 for further discussion). While performance arrangements with AMEP providers ensure teachers’ professional skills and qualifications, no national standards have as yet been established which reflect the changing nature of the AMEP teacher’s work with technology.

**Face-to-face professional development versus ‘virtual’ professional development**

Some informants questioned whether it was appropriate for the AMEP to adopt a professional development model that potentially encouraged the use of the Internet at the expense of face-to-face contact. Informally, this was voiced as a fear about a ‘replacement’ model of professional development that was determined by economic considerations rather than by educational values. One respondent offered the view that it ‘should be seen as complementary, not an alternative to collaborative face-to-face in all cases’. Some teachers were worried that decision-makers might see the use of the Internet as a more cost-effective strategy for professional development purposes and that funding to support face-to-face activities could be withdrawn. These comments also reflected perceptions that face-to-face learning environments are better for supporting collaborative learning processes.

**Professional development on the web: Which model to choose?**

 Concurrent with the research into AMEP user needs, interests and perceptions, the project also investigated current approaches to professional development websites and literature with a view to identifying good practice in the field and determining appropriate models for an AMEP website. The following section briefly describes this phase of the project and highlights some of the theoretical perspectives informing the choice of an online professional development model.

**Researching the literature and current professional development websites**

During the research phase of the project, a literature search was conducted and over 50 websites with a professional development module or
Many of the websites investigated reflected a traditional model of staff development which offers employees a calendar of courses and where the focus of professional development is on the delivery of formal, structured award or non-award courses or programs. Other websites were information-oriented sites. There were, however, some Australian sites that were more fully exploiting the medium to connect scattered people across Australia. Two of these were in the vocational education and training sector (funded through the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA) (Framing the Future (http://www.tafe.sa.edu.au/institutes/para/ftf/) and Learnscope (http://www.learnscope.anta.gov.au/) The latter and the Oz teacher net website (http://www.rite.ed.qut.edu.au/oz-teachernet/) were setting benchmarks for national online staff development in the vocational education and training and school sectors respectively. The Oz teacher net web project grew out of the needs of teachers to acquire online tools, resources and training to help make greater use of the professional development and curriculum opportunities offered by the Internet. According to the site developers:

It is growing to include a range of community building devices that allow Australian teachers to share their experiences, debate issues and reflect on their practice.

These particular websites had been established to promote action learning and action research approaches to professional development which support reflective practice as an important aspect of professional growth. According to Lundin (1997: 12), such an approach is aimed at developing ‘professional teachers who are reflectively able to engage in ongoing inquiry-oriented learning and who are academically and emotionally sensitive to the needs of learners’. He notes (op cit p 23) that:

Recent research into and ways of thinking about learning indicate that improvement in educational practice is most likely to occur through a reflective approach to professional staff development rather than through the adoption of specific methods or techniques of teaching ...

Commenting on the role that the Internet can play in teacher professional development, Owston (1998: xii) suggests that individuals should establish their professional development goals and then link these goals to the Internet which he characterises as ‘the single most effective tool
available today to help you improve professionally’. He notes that professional development needs to be specifically tailored to the background of the participants and suggests that a ‘one size fits all’ approach is unproductive. According to Owston (op cit p 59), two professional development strategies — building virtual professional communities and learning through research — are the two most valuable areas supported by online technologies.

The importance of the more direct ownership of one’s professional development is also reflected in Warschauer’s (1999) recent study of electronic literacies. Warschauer (1999: 164) refers to Lemke’s distinctions between a curricular paradigm and an interactive learning paradigm:

The curricular paradigm assumes that someone else will decide what you need to know, and will arrange for you to learn it all in a fixed order and on a fixed timetable ... The interactive paradigm assumes that people determine what they need to know based on their participation in activities where such needs arise, and in consultation with knowledgeable specialists; that they learn in the order that suits them, at a comfortable pace, and just in time to make use of what they learn.

It was this kind of interactive learning paradigm that seemed clearly appropriate to the AMEP audience. In setting out to develop a professional development website, we therefore adopted a broad definition of professional development as an activity which engages a professional in acquiring knowledge and skills but at the same time encourages a reflective process in order to enhance that person’s practice.

**Translating user needs into website content and activity**

As noted above, the data collected from the national survey responses showed a huge diversity of needs and interests amongst the primary target audience. This diversity was not surprising given the target group profiles referred to earlier. However, it also reflects the mission of the AMEP, which addresses English language learning as well as settlement needs and information. Given this broad charter, the program draws on a diverse disciplinary base that encompasses, *inter alia*, theoretical and applied linguistics, adult, vocational and community education, sociology, social welfare, immigration studies, multiculturalism, and information technology. The structure and content of the website had to be able to support this diversity of needs and interests if it was going to be relevant. At the same time, the opportunity for the user to exercise choice, explore rich resources and exercise autonomy was also a critical element. A curricular paradigm with a ‘delivery mode’ model was clearly inappropriate in the context of the AMEP.
Building an AMEP professional development website

Priorities for an AMEP site

Consultations with program managers and teachers identified three key features that an AMEP website should exhibit:

❖ It had to be relevant to the day-to-day activities of teachers and support them in maximising the potential of the Internet.
❖ It should provide up-to-date professional reading material with links to well-researched sites that offered ‘rich’ content.
❖ It should establish learning communities and deliver accredited short courses.

The website structure

The structure and content of the AMEP professional development website (to be called *Professional Connections*) were built on the basis of the survey data and discussions with potential users described above. Three major areas or ‘locations’ were developed for the site:

❖ The *Noticeboard* (reflecting the place teachers and other staff go to find out what’s new or what’s on, and to read posters and fliers from professional organisations et cetera)
❖ *Learning Communities* (the group learning type of activities that many staff enjoy whether in a formal or informal context — seminars, national workshops, short courses, interest groups and chats in the staff room)
❖ *Resources* (the library, current articles, student learning material).

Within each major area, page development and structure were guided by the following principles:

❖ An explanation of the website should be provided to the user
❖ Provision of site-based resources, information, and activities should be located within the site or linked to other NCELTR online resources
❖ Researched guides should be provided to resources and activities external to the actual site.

The intention was to create a site that was user-friendly, loaded quickly, used simple graphics and had easy navigation with, most importantly, changing content.

Interactivity

Two of the major goals for website developers are site interactivity and audience loyalty. After original content, the most important trait for a website is the degree to which the site engages the user in an interaction
with the site. The vehicle for this important component of the website was the Feature Spot. The Feature Spot module aimed to engage the interest of the user with a magazine style, guest interview based activity in which were embedded resources internal and external to the website. The survey responses had indicated a number of potential areas of interest for AMEP users, including assessment and moderation. Assessment in the AMEP was thus developed as a Feature Spot. Its structure followed the model described above. Users are welcomed to the site and introduced to the range of activities in the site. Interviews with researchers and teachers in the AMEP highlight key issues for assessment and embedded links to rich resources locally and internationally are provided. Users can take a web tour of relevant assessment and testing websites and also engage in a database search for resources freely available to AMEP providers.

**Evaluating and testing the website**

The initial testing of the website involved sixteen interested AMEP teachers who had volunteered to be part of a website tester group. Feedback was gathered using a structured evaluation schedule which encompassed a range of criteria:

- overall site-navigational intuitiveness
- link functionality
- appropriateness
- range and number of links
- browser compatibility
- page size and complexity
- wait times
- clarity of purpose
- organization of the site
- relevance and use of the site
- visual impact
- design and user interface.

Tester responses are summarised in Table 3.

It can be seen that the initial evaluation was generally positive and comments and suggestions have subsequently been used to improve the content and structure of the current website.
Table 3: Summary of initial site evaluation

| Overall the site’s navigational intuitiveness, clarity and functionality are |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 9 | Good | 6 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Overall the functionality of the links are |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 7 | Good | 5 | OK | Need Improvement |

| The appropriateness and quality of the links provided are |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 8 | Good | 4 | OK | Need Improvement |

| The range and number of the links provided are |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 6 | Good | 4 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Compatibility with the browser is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 11 | Good | 2 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Overall page size and complexity |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 6 | Good | 9 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Clarity of the purpose of the site is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 11 | Good | 4 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Organisation of the content is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 10 | Good | 4 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Relevance and usefulness of the content to the audience |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 7 | Good | 7 | OK | Need Improvement |

| Visual impact of the website is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 8 | Good | 6 | OK | Need Improvement |

| The visual design of the website (layout, use of space, complexity/simplicity) is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 6 | Good | 7 | OK | 1 Need Improvement |

| The user interface (friendliness, contact and help details, tutorials, logic and consistency) is |
|------------------|-----|-----|-----|
| Excellent | 6 | Good | 6 | OK | 1 Need Improvement |

Conclusion

In this article we have seen how the widespread adoption of computer-mediated technologies in second language education created the need for new models of professional development in the AMEP. I have described a project which set out to address this need through researching user priorities and developing Professional Connections, a dedicated website for AMEP practitioners located at http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep.

The creation of this website has been the first step towards building
virtual learning communities across the AMEP. In further pursuit of this aim, during 2000 a range of different models of online learning have been piloted and evaluated, and a number of significant changes to the structure and content of the website have been made in line with audience feedback (Lander, Moar and Hyde 2000). The learning acquired during the first year of research and development has underpinned many of these current developments. However, in a rapidly changing educational environment, Professional Connections will only maintain its relevance and audience loyalty if it is able to provide resources and learning opportunities that address current professional issues and concerns. Keeping in close touch with AMEP practitioners and ensuring that the site is constantly updated to meet needs and expectations as they arise will be an ongoing challenge for the future.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Judy King, Ken Willing, Brian Yatman and all of the AMEP teachers and program managers who gave up their time to participate in this project.

Notes

1 This role has now been assumed by the AMEP Research Centre, a consortium involving Macquarie University through NCELTR and La Trobe University through the Institute for Education.

2 The questionnaire asked respondents to select and rank their interest in no more than four activities for the website. The results in Table 2 were based on total counts for each category in the survey.

References


