

## **Collaborative frameworks: a TAFE Queensland case study**

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### **Abstract**

This paper details relevant strategies and models utilised in the planning and execution of the Networked Learning Project. The Networked Learning Project is a collaborative partnership involving primarily regional TAFE Queensland Institutes that aims to improve the availability of training services to regional Queensland. TAFE Queensland Institutes have traditionally focussed on their own business or territories, resulting in offerings limited to the capability of one Institute. The Networked Learning Project is improving equity of access to a wide range of training services across regional Queensland through collaboration. It utilises Kotter's change management model, communities of practice and virtual teaming. The paper then discusses the findings of ongoing evaluation of the project that identify issues such as the need for continuing development of social capital. A collaborative model created by the Cairns Human Services Collaboration Project Group is identified as another relevant tool that could be incorporated in future planning.

### **Introduction**

In 2003 a number of TAFE Queensland Institutes joined together in a collaborative endeavour to improve client offerings, particularly in regional and remote areas, through the Networked Learning Project. This paper outlines the theories and tools used to guide this endeavour including Kotter's change management model, virtual teaming and communities of practice. Evaluations of the project are utilised to identify areas for improvement and an additional model proposed by the Cairns Human Services Collaboration Project Group, a James Cook University research program, is evaluated for its relevance. This research program studied the principles and logics important for building local structures and processes for collaborative action in local and regional communities. The resulting conceptual advances on collaborative ways of organising provide a collaboration framework that honours personal, organisational and societal issues.

### **The Networked Learning Project**

There is currently competition between TAFE Queensland Institutes with little sharing of resources. It is now recognised that to meet these challenges Institutes may need changes in structure, culture and workplace practices. The findings of Rice's study of New South Wales TAFE Institutes is applicable here in its conclusions that whilst centralisation is not an option, collaboration is:

When there is not a lot of money around the way of resolving the tension for an institute to operate and do more with fewer funds is to centralise. If you actually want people to produce good things in colleges they have to have ownership and this ownership is lost with centralisation (2000, p.3).

Whilst collaboration across all Institutes would be beneficial, regional TAFE Queensland TAFE Queensland Institutes face common challenges in meeting the expectations of clients located in regional and remote communities. These challenges include:

- Cost effectively meeting the demand by industry and individuals in small towns and communities for access to the same broad range of training products and services that are offered in the metropolitan area.
- Developing learning strategies that allow for cost effective and flexible services to smaller groups of clients and individuals.
- Addressing the limited range of content expertise that it is possible to have in one geographic location. In traditional approaches to training, available staff rather than demand determine the range of training offered.
- Providing appropriate levels of support to students to ensure effective participation is possible for all client groups. Pure distance or online programs delivered from a central point are not a complete solution.

Improved access to training will increase the prosperity and competitiveness of regions and improve individual's employability and productivity. Consequently, in 2003 the Networked Learning Project was established as a partnership between the Open Learning Institute and seven regional TAFE Queensland Institutes: Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE, Central Queensland Institute of TAFE, Cooloola Sunshine Institute of TAFE, Mount Isa Institute of TAFE, Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE, Tropical North Queensland TAFE and Wide Bay Institute of TAFE.

The Networked Learning Project aspires to utilise blended and distributed delivery strategies to deliver training across regional Queensland in a collaborative and networked way, drawing on resources wherever they are located, and using technology to overcome barriers of distance. The aims of the Networked Learning Project are:

- Piloting of examples of collaborative, distributed delivery involving multiple Institutes and geographically and demographically dispersed client groups including a mix of government and commercial activity.
- Development and testing of a toolkit that provides learning, business process and administrative tools to support collaborative, distributed delivery
- Provision of experience for senior managers in working collaboratively to provide outcomes for TAFE Queensland clients.

This differs significantly from the majority of collaborative projects, which usually focus more on sharing information than collaborative delivery. For example, in 2004 a Reframing the Future project between Wodonga and Central Gippsland Institutes of TAFE involved the Institutes learning from each other about how to improve quality practices under the Australian Quality Training Framework. Staff in a range of roles shared their strategies and established a network to maintain relations (Australian National Training Authority, 2004).

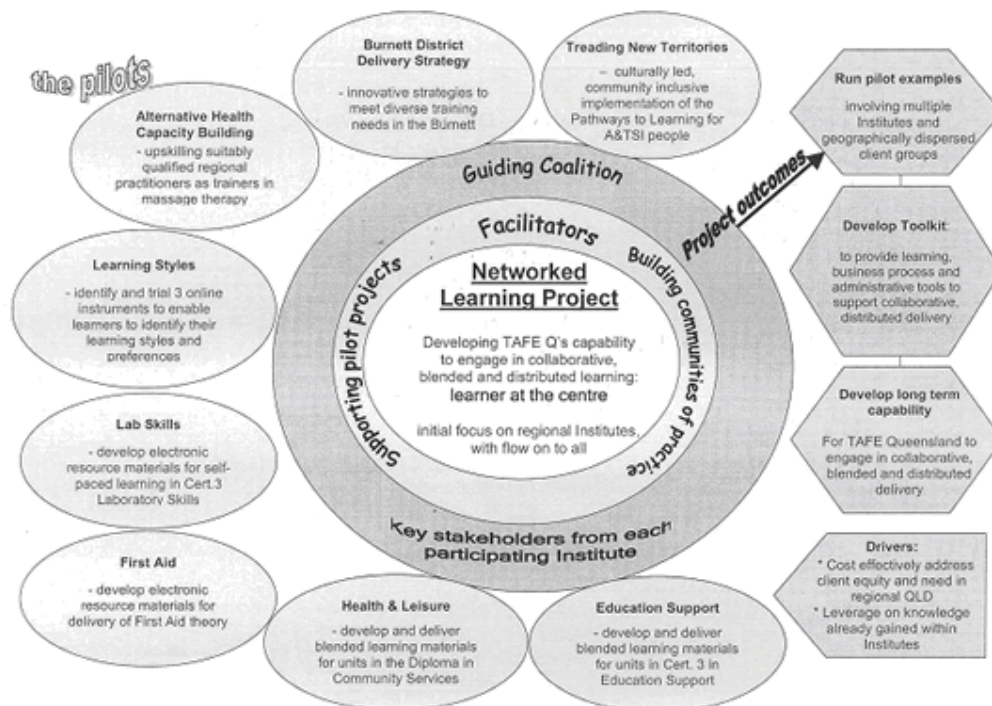
## *Governance*

The Networked Learning Project utilises a number of tools, beginning with a change management model. There are many change management theories that can be used as the theoretical basis on which to base change. To achieve the project aims it was necessary to use cultural change to create an environment in which staff were actively encouraged to develop initiatives that make use of the full range of resources available collaboratively within and beyond government, rather than be constrained by arbitrary internal boundaries. The Networked Learning Project chose to utilise the eight-step process for change contained in one of the foundational texts on change, Kotter's *Leading Change* (1996):

- Establish a sense of urgency
- Create the guiding coalition
- Develop a vision and strategy
- Communicate the vision
- Empower employees for broad-based action
- Generate short term wins
- Consolidate gains and produce more change
- Anchor new approaches in the culture.

To align with Kotter's model a Guiding Coalition was formed to look after the governance aspects of the Networked Learning Project. Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE represents the partnership as advocate and sponsor, providing overall leadership to the project. The project management model is based on shared leadership through this Guiding Coalition. The Guiding Coalition is responsible for Kotter's initial steps: establishing a sense of urgency, developing a vision and strategy, and communicating the vision. Representatives from each Institute meet regularly to participate in both overall project management and also to support pilot projects located within their own Institutes. Facilitators located within Institutes report to the Guiding Coalition on their roles in assisting the pilot projects, and have responsibility for capturing knowledge generated about collaboration and recording it in a Collaborative Delivery Toolkit that encapsulates this knowledge in an easily accessible resource. This model ensures regional Institute ownership of the project and its outcomes and enables connectivity with regional community stakeholders to be maintained.

### **Diagram 1: Networked Learning Project model**



### *Pilot projects*

To generate the short term wins incorporated in the change management model the Networked Learning Project ran 8 pilot projects trialing collaborative models in 2003-04. In 2004-05 a further nine are being run to consolidate gains and produce more change. Some of these include:

- ABCs of Learning Styles is improving student retention through providing awareness of learning styles and preferences.
- Alternative Health Care is collaboratively developing and delivering Certificate IV in Massage across Queensland.
- Burnett District Delivery Strategy is utilising brokerage arrangements to deliver client-focused training identified through community consultative processes.
- Collaborative Delivery of Certificate III in Home and Community Care is building a partnership with Queensland Health to deliver training to Health and Community Care workers.
- Frontline Management is delivering Diploma of Business (Frontline Management) to a range of clients.
- Senior First Aid is identifying opportunities to rationalise delivery of First Aid training using online resources to meet the requirements of First Aid certificates and other qualifications.
- Treading New Territories is delivering the Pathways program to students on Palm Island, Camooweal and at the Kulkathil Skills Centre, Brisbane.
- Underpinning Knowledge for Laboratory Skills is collaboratively delivering elements of Certificate III in Laboratory Skills.

The Networked Learning Project utilises Facilitators to assist pilot projects to achieve their goals, and to gather information gained en route. Mitchell's work on communities in vocational education and training (VET) found that facilitators in VET have and use a wide variety of community building strategies; he notes that a 2002 study concluded that "some VET personnel are highly skilled in facilitating group learning processes" (2003, p.6). The Networked Learning Project used Facilitators in a similar way.

A key resource for Facilitators is the Collaborative Delivery Toolkit, an outcome of the first year of the Networked Learning Project. This provides online resources on how to partner with other TAFE Queensland Institutes to collaboratively deliver training, based on information gained in the first year of the Networked Learning Project and research into previous collaborative activities. It provides case studies of collaborative delivery, a range of collaborative delivery models, and resources to solve the range of teaching and learning, administrative and business challenges that can arise. There are sections on client needs analysis, pedagogy, learner support models, learner management, administration, resourcing, and stakeholder liaison.

### *Collaborative tools*

While Kotter provided guidance on overall change management, the Networked Learning Project also needed infrastructure specific to collaboration. Evaristo and Munkvold suggest that collaborative infrastructure needs:

1. Information technology infrastructure
2. Collaborative applications and tools
3. Collaborative know-how (as cited in Dellow, 2004).

The work of Gundry (2004) on how to enable organisational capability for virtual teaming outlines similar requirements:

1. Information technology: robust, standardised collaboration tools that are available anywhere, anytime, to internal and external people.
2. Skills: widespread training in virtual teaming approaches, methods and skills; and channels for best practice.
3. Culture: culture of cooperation and collaboration amongst business units and individuals, including a change program which demonstrates benefits to individuals.

To begin with Gundry's third point, the creation of a culture of cooperation is included to some degree in Kotter's model. However, a wider interpretation of culture that emphasises community development has been identified by a number of scholars as a key element of successful collaboration. Establishing a community of practice can assist in creating a network of like-minded staff around a similar goal. Mitchell states: "Community-need is needed in VET to meet common challenges ... community-building is not a luxury in the VET sector: it is a necessity (2003, p.6). COPs were also useful means for sharing and capturing knowledge generated; Brook and Oliver (2003) provide a good overview on why COPs are useful in learning:

There is strong support for the supposition that the social phenomenon of community may be put to good use in the support of online learning. This is well supported by theories of learning that highlight the role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge.

Consequently, to help build community and capture knowledge generated in the Networked Learning Project, communities of practice (COPs) for each pilot project were established in line with contemporary theory on this. One excellent resource on how to establish successful COPs is Mitchell's evaluation of Australian National Training Authority-funded communities of practice in VET (2003). Like many other works on COPs, Mitchell uses much of the work of Wenger. Wenger identifies 3 key structural elements of a community of practice:

- Domain of knowledge: creates common ground
- Community: creates the social fabric of learning
- Practice: set of frameworks, ideas and tools that community members shared (Wenger, n.d.).

Brook and Oliver's guidelines for online learning communities suggest that COPs must have a reason (i.e. serve a purpose in members' lives), then enable, support and facilitate communication (2003). Networked Learning Projects aimed to achieve these goals by utilising a range of mechanisms made available through the information technology tools provided below, and using practical strategies for building virtual relationships such as those suggested by Pauleen (2004) including the scheduling of face to face meetings whenever possible (especially at start of team), regular usage of the phone to build and maintain relationships, and provision of regular updates of team progress.

The skills and collaborative know-how requirements on the lists above were provided to some degree through the Facilitator network, and built upon by the creation of the Collaborative Delivery Toolkit that recorded collaborative issues and their solutions as they arose. Information technology infrastructure and tools are the remaining items, and these were equally important elements for the Networked Learning Project, particularly for communication. Maintaining effective flow of information and negotiating disparate ideas across geographic distance was always going to be one of the significant challenges posed by collaborative delivery. Each of the groupings would need good communications (in addition to a strong sense of community) to work as teams across significant distances. Wenger provides a list of eight community- and knowledge-oriented technologies that are useful when developing communities of practice:

- Desktop of the knowledge worker
- Online project spaces for team work
- Website communities
- Discussion groups
- Synchronous meeting facilities, online conference rooms, and chat
- Community-oriented e-learning systems
- Access to expertise, through questions or expert profiles
- Knowledge repositories (as cited in Gotze, 2001).

Gotze also suggests that blogs and peer-to-peer (P2P) software should be added to Wenger's list. While all of these exist in TAFE Queensland Institutes, they are not all easily accessible by a project such as this. However, there are a number of information technology resources available that are used by the Networked Learning Project. These include in-house services such as Videolinq, and commercial communication products such as P2P software and teleconferencing. However, as Gundry (2004) notes, ensuring that all staff had access to the same tools can be problematic, particularly for group communication tools such as P2P software. This is the case for the Networked Learning Project; each Institute has its own security protocols with regard to P2P software; consequently, some Institutes will not allow their staff to install software being used. While P2P software is used by small groups, a better option for larger groups is the use of free hosting options for developing online networks that allow users to create webpages, publish blogs and have online chats. Those in use include:

- [Edna Communities](#): a space where groups can utilise communication and collaboration tools including web forums, live chats, share resources, create web pages, and do online polling
- [Blok](#): a Web site on which you can create Web pages, publish a blog, and host online discussions, all within your browser.
- [My connected community](#): a virtual meeting place where communities interact online.

Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE also provides a central intranet site for information sharing but even this had limitations as it was not accessible to staff working from home or external advisors.

## **Findings and discussion**

Integration of the models and strategies discussed above into the planning stage has ensured that the Networked Learning Project has had many successes. Collaborative delivery has been enabled in a number of new vocational training areas, and expertise has been built-up in participating Institutes, and recorded in the Collaborative Delivery Toolkit for use by all. However, ongoing evaluation has, as always, revealed areas for improvement. It has become apparent that despite a conscious effort to develop communities within the Networked Learning Project, the most common issues arising are to do with the need to establish trust and rapport between staff from different Institutes. This contrasts with Mitchell's study, which identified practice as the area in need of most work (2003, p.8).

While the models and tools chosen by the Networked Learning Project included a focus on community, other scholars emphasise it more strongly. For example, Pauleen (2004) sees a key success factor in virtual environments to be the development of social capital; the stock of trust and understanding between people that enables knowledge exchange and production and lowering of transaction costs. Pauleen believes that very little is known about how social capital develops and operates in virtual environments, despite its contemporary importance.

One interesting source of theory in this area is the Cairns Human Services Collaboration Project Group. Comprised of staff of James Cook University and the Department of Communities, this group has explored models of collaboration that are sustainable, effective, responsive ways of working, that are outcome-focussed and build connectedness (Earles, Lynn and Knell, 2004b). While their conceptual framework for collaboration was developed for organisations in the human services, it is potentially useful to the Networked Learning Project. The set of ten principles and logics they devised to guide collaborative practice principles are:

1. State of equanimity: is the state of balance between engagement, planning, action and reflection processes for beneficial outcomes.
2. Fractality: it is a oneness in connection and experience that varies at different scales of focus but allows an organisation to self-organise according to the dynamics in its own time and space environment.
3. Relational synergy: is an epiphanic connection that is generated through the stock of trust, identity and resources that exists between individuals, local organisations and groups and the energy that draws people together.
4. Groundedness: is strategies and activities well-rooted in the communal and cultural soils of local groups, recognising the local context, local ownership/power and control, and local leadership.
5. Conscious sustainability: is a conscious ability and process of continually reading the dynamics of a complex world and frequently reframing and reorganising the corporational components according to the changes in those dynamics.
6. Liminal space: is open, unfinished, decentred – a mental, emotional, spiritual, physical space of possibility and transition where the participants are in transition from one place of meaning and action to another.
7. Edge space: is the living space between various entities and bodies. The edges are not lines of separation but ‘zones of interaction, transformation, transgression and possibility’ between the overlapping organisational systems.
8. Synergistic goals: is a open and honest combining of goals to affect greater than the sum of the parts. Goals are implementable ideas that may be different but must not be in conflict.
9. Transformational capabilities: is dependent on energy, wider capabilities and infrastructure that can activate and sustain collaborative endeavours.
10. Authentic power: is a multi-directional and multi-level flow of power that is diffused/expressed through multiple sites to enable shared power rather than power over (Earles, Lynn and Knell, 2004b, pp.43-71).

Many of these principles have already been built into the Networked Learning Project through other strategies. For example, fractality existed in the Networked Learning Project in that each COP and/or pilot project could be seen as a complete project in themselves, whilst also part of a bigger whole. Furthermore, it was necessary that people involved in the different parts of the Networked Learning Project understood their role in a bigger picture to be able to achieve synergistic goals. The Networked Learning Project utilised committees and reporting mechanism to ensure all four elements required to provide a state of equanimity. However, as Earles, Lynn and Knell found, balance is not always easy to achieve and often there is overemphasis on action; some Networked Learning Project pilot projects similarly felt there were imbalances at times. The need for groundedness was recognised as members of the



Networked Learning Project remained members of separate Institutes throughout the project. Consequently local contexts remained relevant, particularly for some decision-making. It had been recognised early on that this kind of devolved model of ownership was necessary for achieving success towards a common goal. Liminality, edge space and transformational capabilities were provided through funding, group meetings and training days that enabled provide staff with time to work on projects away from their usual job responsibilities.

However, while most of the principles can be found, it is also obvious that conscious usage of these logics could further improve their application. For example, relational synergy is based on recognition that people can feel disconnected and isolated; consequently trust is vital for obtaining effective collaboration. The Networked Learning Project provided numerous opportunities for project members to meet together, both face-to-face and virtually, to help generate beneficial relationships. Additionally, some pilot project teams were based on past collaborative endeavours where this trust already existed. However, trust and rapport continued to be an ongoing issue, particularly when new members joined teams. A more focused emphasis on this area, using these principles as guidelines, could have been useful from the start. Similarly, while liminality, edge space and transformational capabilities opportunities were provided through some meetings; these opportunities were not specifically designed with these outcomes in mind. If they had been more deliberately planned with this in mind then the outcomes may have been improved. The project encountered and solved many issues related to groundedness, conscious sustainability, synergistic goals, transformational capabilities and authentic power; however, at the time the issues were not understood in these terms. Application of this model to the Networked Learning Project may have allowed more conscious reflection and understanding of what was happening and how; improving the learning outcomes for all.

## **Conclusion**

There are many aspects that need consideration when establishing a collaborative project such as this, involving virtual teams comprised of staff from different organisations. The Networked Learning Project's planning process ensured many of these were integrated from the start; resulting in outcomes that have benefited TAFE Queensland's clientele by providing a wider range of courses, particularly to regional and remote areas. Ongoing evaluation has revealed aspects that still require more emphasis. The need for creation of trust and rapport, particularly with new members in primarily online communities, cannot be over-emphasised. However, issues in this area are common to projects working in the still fledgling area of online COPs. To better address both these issues and a range of others emerging in collaborative models, it is evident that future combination of the models and strategies already utilised in the Networked Learning Project with models such as those provided by the Cairns Human Services Collaboration Project Group would be useful.

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