

Supporting rural learners - now and in the future: a conversation.

This conversation is lead by Terry Marler (Programme Developer, Education Development Centre, Otago Polytechnic, Dunedin, New Zealand).

My name is Terry Marler and I'm a program developer in the Education Development Centre of Otago Polytechnic in Dunedin New Zealand (NZ). My role is to support lecturers in developing flexible and blended courses, and I have a special interest in rural learners which I followed up in recent travels to India and Australia as part of my [FLLinNZ](#) year. I wanted to find out what others in the field are doing so I invited the following leaders to collaborate with me. They are Jean Tilleyshort, from Central Otago's campus of Otago Polytech, Stanley Frielick, the Director of Flexible Learning in NorthTec, Northland New Zealand and Margaret Granger, the e-learning Coordinator for Technical and Further Education in South Australia's Regional Institute, Port Lincoln.

- Hi I'm Jean Tilleyshort (Central Otago, New Zealand) campus manager for Central Otago, and group manager for Regions and my responsibility is for ensuring that our programs meet the needs of Otago's rural communities. Currently we're really focused on redeveloping our traditional programs to make access much better for people wherever and whenever they need to. Otago Polytechnic has got a central campus in Dunedin, a small campus in Central Otago with programs in Cromwell and Wanaka, and community learning centres in Dunedin, South and Central Otago. As well we offer some programs around the country by distance e.g. veterinary nursing, some post graduate nursing studies.
- Hi I'm Stanley Frielick (Director of Flexible Learning at [NorthTec](#) in Northland New Zealand). My role has been to develop the infrastructure and staff capacity to connect students through flexible learning. We've got 5 regional learning centres at NorthTec centred around the main campus hub in Whangarei. Students are geographically dispersed across the region which has some of the highest socio-economic deprivation profiles in NZ. Over 40% of our students are Maori with many living in remote rural areas.
- Margaret Granger (e-learning Coordinator, Technical and Further Education South Australia, Regional Institute, Port Lincoln, SA). As a regional dweller I am particularly cognisant of ensuring that learners in rural and regional locations are not left 'off the agenda' when gaining access to education and training. New technologies are opening the way for these learners to participate and be active in gaining learning and skills in this new technology-driven age.

Welcome Jean, Margaret and Stanley. I am learning to use this collaborative writing and podcasting software so please be patient with me! So away we go.... there are some basic questions...conversation starters that I'd like to discuss. Question 1 is...

What do you feel is special about rural learners? Don't all learners need support?

Margaret: We have spent a lot of time and effort making provision for many learners who, for one reason or other, are considered disadvantaged, either physically or as a result of being from a designated group. The challenges of geographic distances and sparsely

scattered small communities are often not considered when looking at the provision of education and training to regional and rural learners.

Technology offers a means of helping overcome the barriers of communicating with others and accessing learning. What would we do without the telephone? And now, the world of the Internet is opening up visual, audio and rich media content and learning opportunities to rural learners.

Jean: In terms of rural learners, in addition to geographical isolation making getting to classroom based courses difficult, our rural learners have less access to many of the things that support learning, such as the ability to discuss their ideas and issues with others with the same interests, lack of libraries, and even good quality Internet access. Many of our rural learners haven't learnt how to utilise online information resources, such as the Internet, and see the Internet as really only useful for transactions such as purchasing and banking. Often their learning skills can be poorly developed in that they depend on a teacher to fill them with knowledge, rather than taking the initiative and responsibility for their own learning (this is usually a function of their age and/or lack of educational success), and it means that they rely more heavily on teacher led learning. So we find that that is reflected in a preference for face to face teaching, with a 'known person' rather than online educational opportunities.

Terry: I would like to argue that rural learners are a special case because rural communities are different to urban ones. In New Zealand (and I believe in Australia too) the smaller township has been under all kinds of attack for some years. The school has closed, the post office is now just a part of a shop (if the shop hasn't closed), no-one uses the local institute hall and some kids broke its windows last year. Those kids now go to the big town or city for school and they sure won't be able to get a job in the area. The lucky (arguably!) towns are turning into holiday places for city people, or lifestyle block centres for retired accountants... a huge change has occurred, and that means challenges for educators. And yet, the *feeling* of being rural still exists - in fact, it's what attracts those lifestylers. At its best, that means independence and openness to innovation and the other side of that coin is isolation from others of similar interests. The formation of a learning community requires us to do something to help. It won't happen by itself in the cafeteria, as it might on campus.

OK. Thank you for that now... question 2:

How are we currently supporting rural learners?

Margaret: TAFE SA Regional Institute covers the whole regional expanse of South Australia, that is, everything outside Adelaide. There are over 40 campuses, many very small learning centres, servicing a wide range of industry and community groups. With the current expansion in industries such as mining, viticulture, aquaculture and tourism in addition to general business and education requirements, there is wide scope to increase the training and upskilling of the regional and rural workforce using innovative technologies.

Traditionally, general training courses have been conducted on campus, where numbers warrant, or through workshops where a lecturer might travel to a more remote campus,

and follow up with correspondence-style written materials and telephone support. Since the mid-1990s, the larger campuses within regional South Australia have had dedicated videoconference classrooms, enabling the grouping of disparate numbers of students into a virtual class under the tutelage of a lecturer, or group of lecturers.

Bringing training and communication to a learner's desktop - provided that they have access to the technology and suitable bandwidth - is also enabling rural learners, like their city counterparts, to have access to 'just-in-time' and 'just-for-me' learning at work and/or when they have time to access it - (say after the kids are asleep!). This is also raising the issue of support, in a delivery sense, in that lecturers or facilitators are being expected to be available when the learner needs, not during the 9-5 work day. Facilitators and support staff are being asked to re-think how and when they can deliver the services required in the new learning environment.

Jean: In terms of how we currently support rural learners, most people in Otago would be within a 1/2 hour drive of a community learning centre, so it's not *that* hard for them to access our resources. The labour markets in our subregions are really different, both in terms of engagement levels and industry sectors represented and that means that the needs in the different districts are very different.

In past years we've concentrated very much on full time and classroom based programs, but with full employment and changing expectations, the focus is having to move much more to flexible delivery. Generally, driven by full employment and an increase in industry training so we're much more focused on workplace learning, and therefore part-time, on and off-job training. In addition, we see huge scope for interest based learning, as the 'baby boomers' (those in the 42-60 age bracket) want to keep learning once they've achieved their career goals.

A key issue for us is access to broadband is really poor in our rural areas, outside the main townships, and dial up access can be extremely slow, so take up of online delivery has been correspondingly slow. We find that currently most rural people prefer to come into a learning centre rather than to use an online program at home to develop the same skills. We've actually done research in the horticulture and agriculture sectors that shows that people prefer, in those sectors prefer not to use the Internet to find information or learn. Our rural people tend to prefer paper or CD rom based resources for their learning, and they prefer very much to deal with a person who they know and trust, so face to face contact is currently really important to them.

Our most successful distance model in Central Otago at present reflects that and includes support not only from their employer (especially in the development of practical skills) and a lecturer with the subject expertise, but also a facilitator who develops an ongoing relationship with them, a face to face relationship where they're jointly planning their learning program and monitoring their progress, providing tutorials, arranging face to face opportunities as needed, and things like that, including right through to nagging them to get things finished as needed. And so that does often include things like visits to the students often in their workplace and emails and text messages and things like that.

Stanley: In Northland, the use of technology to support learners has become a central aspect of strategic planning. Our main goal is to lessen the travel times for learners to get

to a place of learning - to shorten this from sometimes up to three hours to less than 20 minutes. The increasing penetration of broadband will eventually enable all learners to access courses from their home, workplace, or marae (community centre) - but until then we are developing our regional centres with technology-supported learning.

Terry: OK! Thanks for that guys now...question 3:

What have you found that rural learners really value from their learning?

Margaret: My experience in regional South Australia, has been that because they are often isolated, rural learners *really* value being able to talk to their lecturer and communicate with other learners who are journeying with them. The advent of communications tools such as discussion forums, blogs and more recently the advent of web conferencing tools such as Centra or Elluminate *Live!* are opening up the opportunities for rural learners to become part of a 'classroom', a 'virtual classroom' where they are participating in a learning community.

Stanley: The sense of overcoming isolation is vital for connecting communities in Northland. As yet we are not using web-conferencing tools but increasing use is being made of video-conferencing, supported by interactive whiteboards and Moodle in the learning centres. For example, our Te Puna (School of Maori Studies) students have 2 sessions a week where the class is distributed across 3 learning centres via videoconferencing.

Jean: Rural learners in Otago tell us how much they value being able to share their learning and their concerns with others who are interested in the same things. One of the things about being a rural learner is that often there are not other people near you studying the same subject areas, so they can often feel isolated in their learning. So it's really good for them to be able to interact with others who are learning the same subjects or who are interested in the same things.

Terry: Thank you very much. Now...question 4:

Where do learners find access to an online environment if they do not have their own computer and online access?

Margaret: Many smaller communities have joint-use facilities with their local school and/or library. Many of the public libraries provide free access to the Internet. Other communities have built 'telecentres' which provide community access to computers, the Internet and provide business transaction access. Some are free, some charge a small fee for access. Many of the telecentres also provide a focus for community learning and technology support for users. The Australian Commonwealth Government funded Outback Support Project has funded several information technology (IT) trainees within some of these centres, providing training for young people in their own community and IT support for users within the community. The project is also providing online training and support for learners in basic IT operations using the Centra web-conferencing tool.

Jean: Libraries and schools are also the main source in our area. The community learning centres currently focus on providing computing programs, and are used by many people to learn how to use a computer for the first time, and to gain access until they purchase their own computer. The centres are gradually being broadened to support a wider range of learning opportunities and become a support service for distance/online programs run from Dunedin. In addition we are exploring the opportunities that the state school based teleconferencing and broadband networks offer.

Terry: Yes, there are very successful support systems already in place for rural students in New Zealand and in Australia, no doubt about it - but it seems to me that, like our access to broadband, it's patchy. And we can sure learn from each other. I agree with Jean that one of the great strengths of her campus is the roaming facilitator who visits individual students at their workplaces... but maybe this is not practical in outback South Australia. I am keen to do more work with conferencing software like Elluminate *Live!* or Centra, which might bring a little more of that personal touch than just a phone call, and yet does not require broadband. I also agree that connection is the key. I have done some informal research into the reasons for rural learners' high attrition rates and it often boiled down to a sticky patch when something in the student's work or personal life was interfering with finding time for learning. In a face to face situation, it is easy to talk to someone about such problems. Where distance is involved, it's harder - or perceived to be harder. Maybe we should be more pro-active about pastoral care with rural students, and build costs for this into the design of programs, if we want to have good completion rates.

So that leads us to the last question....Question 5:

What can we do better?

Margaret: We have been using Elluminate *Live!* for web-conferencing within the Australian Flexible Learning Framework for about 3 years now. Generally this has been a good meeting tool, for diversely scattered Framework members, or a means to bring guest speakers to a LearnScope or other professional development workshop. Some TAFE Institutes or other providers have now purchased licences to use within teaching programs, and there are several good examples from across Western Australia of Elluminate *Live!* being used as a web-conferencing tool to deliver training to diversely scattered students.

In South Australia, we have commenced using Centra (a similar web-conferencing platform) to bring teaching and learning to the desktop. I have been facilitating basic IT tutorials to a group of students scattered across outback SA. While the system will operate using basic dial-up connections, a much richer social and interactive environment can be provided if attendees can connect their web cameras and see each other. Poor bandwidth also upsets such activities as application sharing and web exploration. We have still to test optimum numbers of students for best interactivity and performance.

Again, staff across TAFE SA Regional are also finding this a useful tool for meetings, (It certainly saves on travel!), and we have also noted that Community Groups have 'borrowed' a set of Centra licences for a meeting. One Isolated Parents' Group had their

first meeting for several years using this means - a great outcome for enabling communities.

Jean: In terms of what we can do better, we are just beginning to explore options for conferencing tools. We have only used videoconferencing in the past, and that wasn't very satisfactory. There'd be huge advantages for us in software such as Margaret's been discussing, both for learning opportunities and for meetings, small groups, and between our staff as well.

The other thing that we could improve is the working between departments at our main campus and our regional campus and learning centres, so that we can offer more support to students who are studying distance programs and would really like to use regional facilities to support their learning. For example, people with no broadband access could use our computer facilities in our learning centres to have a study group in our facilities...sorry to ...gain better access, or people who would prefer to study in a group could use a learning centre to have a study group, while getting their subject expertise support from the centrally based lecturer. In that way I think we could attract or retain more students whose computing skills and access and their learning styles have put them off online learning alone.

Terry: Yes, I'm interested in Margaret's comment about a richer social environment using the webcam. I wasn't convinced of the value of the bandwidth-hungry talking face until my trip to India to visit the Commonwealth of Learning's project on Lifelong Learning for Farmers in the southern rural villages of Tamil Nadu. I met with dairy farming smallholders (almost all women) who were using Internet kiosks to connect with experts in veterinary science and agronomy, soil science and botany to discuss problems in animal health and plant production.

Now, until quite recently, the only conversations they'd ever known were face to face; and so the talking face of the person with whom they were communicating is very important. I suspect this is true of people in our culture, also, maybe more than we know - and the voice likewise can turn an impersonal computer-mediated connection into a real human connection. This is getting back to what good teachers have always done well!

So if I could wave a magic wand, I would give every rural learner a broadband connection and regular computer conferencing to provide that tutorial support that we give to on-campus students and perhaps even the unscheduled corridor chat. But what about the informal conversations and peer to peer learning that happens in the cafeteria? One colleague who 'delivers' to rural students recently told me how they had organised their own study groups in each others' homes to collaborate on open-book assignments. Maybe we could provide them with a reasonably close venue for all of the above in a small learning centre - a fast connection, a cup of coffee, an experienced teacher for a few hours a week, a small library and other students - all at relatively low cost.

Now Tasmania has a great model of this already in place. When Jean and I visited [North East Education and Training \(NEET\) Inc.](#) at St. Helen's, we met [secondary school pupils studying aquaculture and aged care](#) with the help of Roger Harlow and Maree Swanson; and also Andy Norris showed us the phenomenal growth and success of the [Online Access Centres](#) in rural centres all over the state. This disseminated support is providing

learners with the same winning combination that I'd seen working in India - technological tools and experienced teachers. But I think we also need to know more about attrition rates, reasons for non-completion and barriers to learning in our rural students. I suspect that the cognitive overload factor early in distance courses is important, but more research needs to be done on their particular problems. Rural learners deserve at least the same level of support that we regard as normal for on-campus students - and perhaps more, to counteract the 'loneliness of the long-distance learner'.

Reflection

Well, I imagined that this topic would start simple and get more complex....so I started with the simple bits. My plan was to start asking questions, but it has evolved into an interview in style. Of course I don't have a monopoly on asking questions, so please feel free to use the comments feature to ask your questions and to continue this exploration of rural students' needs. Thank you.