

PEDAGOGY, PARTNERSHIPS AND PATHWAYS: THE LEARNING NETWORK QUEENSLAND RECIPE FOR SUCCESS WITH LIFELONG LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Lifelong learning opportunities can make significant differences to peoples' lives by helping to build sustainable communities. Learning Network Queensland has been committed to offering these opportunities for many years by using a responsible approach to developing pedagogy, community partnerships, and appropriate pathways for its lifelong learners.

INTRODUCTION

Learning Network Queensland (LNQ) (formerly Queensland Open Learning Network) has been a feature of the Queensland Information and Communications Technology (ICT) landscape for the past 16 years. Our mission has been to provide opportunities to all Queenslanders to engage in lifelong learning, and we have recognised the importance of new technologies to the development of Queensland's economic and social development and wellbeing.

The LNQ network, covering 40 centres and satellite centres across rural and regional Queensland, is unique, and delivers outcomes to ordinary Queenslanders who would not otherwise have access to learning opportunities that position them to engage in the changing nature of work and business. Indeed, our network builds the social and economic fabric of rural and regional Queensland, not in competition with the traditional learning institutions, but rather as an adjunct to the learning opportunities they hope to deliver.

Learning Network Queensland understands the importance of working smarter, embracing change, and fostering innovation. Our role in delivering on those strategies is unique, within Queensland and, indeed, Australia. Our success is in developing human and social capital and in building the capacity of Queenslanders to excel in a changing global economy. LNQ provides something unique to older learners and isolated Queenslanders, which can only be understood by working closely in partnership with communities. That "something" is "comfort in learning". We are not talking about plush learning centres or lecture theatres. We are talking about taking learning opportunities to the people where they feel comfortable to learn with their peers; in community centres, community halls and, sometimes, in their own

homes; and supporting them through the learning process.

In the past three years, over 10,000 learners have passed through LNQ's doors (or we through their's) learning new employment and business skills and the use of new technologies. We have run programs that have taken people from having never even turned on a computer, to developing their own community websites, operating and advertising their businesses online, gaining employment, starting small businesses, and proceeding to tertiary studies.

Whilst many younger people will grow up comfortable and skilled in the use of new technologies, and recognise – through extensive IT school education programs – the importance those technologies have to the global economy, older Queenslanders, or those disengaged from education, often miss opportunities through fear and inadequate skill levels. Equally, people who have been absent from the learning environment for some time do not feel they have the academic skills necessary to commence studies at a tertiary level – hence the comprehensive federal and state government programs that LNQ deliver, which provide the pathway to further education. Our participants regularly move on to higher levels of learning after gaining confidence in themselves and after breaking down their barriers to learning, especially learning with new technologies.

During a recent (November, 2005) meeting with representatives of the federal Department of Employment, Science and Training regarding the evaluation of the "Basic IT Enabling Skills (BITES) Project 2005", a funded LNQ program, it was noted that greater community networking was definitely taking place as a result of this training. Acknowledgement was also made of the pathway that this type of learning opens up to the unemployed and ageing within the

community. The full evaluation report of this project has as yet to be published.

LNQ has actively sought and developed strong partnerships with the private sector and education providers, and has been highly successful in securing funded programs for Queensland – targeting the sector of the learning community outside the realm of other providers. Through its “UNILEARN” program, LNQ also offers preparatory and bridging courses in a range of popular discipline areas. These courses are available to residents of all states.

LEARNING NETWORK QUEENSLAND

LNQ has been successfully operating as a public sector, non-profit network since 1989, and as a registered training organization (RTO) since 1999. LNQ employs over 220 full-time, part-time, and casual staff across Queensland. Many of LNQ’s staff are graduates of its training programs.

LNQ’s network stretches from Torres Strait and Far North Queensland, south to the New South Wales border, and as far west as Mt Isa and Cunnamulla. This network of learning centres uniquely positions LNQ to provide opportunities for people to engage in learning in areas beyond the scope of other education and training providers. The outreach capability of the network, utilising laptop computer labs, further expands the reach of LNQ into an unlimited number of rural and remote Queensland communities.

LNQ mainly uses wireless Ethernet technologies across its wide-area network of more than computers to facilitate ease of establishing and operationalizing centres quickly, and minimising the physical impact on LNQ’s host buildings. In addition to LNQ’s network of Learning Centres across the state, LNQ has also established 18 mobile laptop “labs”; each Lab consisting of 5 laptop computers, wireless networking, and printing and Internet capabilities. These facilities further increase LNQ’s capacity to supply education and information to outlying areas of Queensland.

LIFELONG LEARNING

At the federal level, *Adult Learning Australia* (ALA) – the national peak body representing organizations and individuals in the adult learning field – has come out in support of the following:

1. Research and development into the ageing community and how lifelong learning can support its wellbeing.
2. The “ecological perspective on adult learning” (McIntyre, 2005) that we need to develop to support learning in workplaces and communities.
3. The fact that adult learning needs to be understood in relation to broad social policy appreciating how different groups respond to learning later in life and how learning can support life-course transitions.
4. The development of “learning communities”, a concept supported by the Federal Government and the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ), with recent examples of how educational providers, local government, agencies, and businesses can help build community capacity. ALA states that many Adult and Community Education (ACE) providers can and should lead community-based initiatives.

Peter Kearns, an ALA researcher (Kearns, 2005), has said that the lack of understanding and policy adoption in the area of lifelong learning could result in hindering our future development as an inclusive and successful society unless these shortfalls are addressed in a strategic and collaborative way. Learning communities can encourage and build a creative culture for learning through the role of schools, TAFE (Technical and Further Education), libraries, the arts, business, government (state and local), and other ACE providers in a shared vision. Learning becomes a key strategy for community building. Some recent learning community initiatives include the Hume Global Learning Village, Yarra Ranges Learning Communities, and work being done in Stanthorpe and Thuringowa in Queensland.

Recent OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and UK (OECD, 2001) research has shown that lifelong learning supports community sustainability by greater community engagement and wellbeing in those undertaking the learning. Community sustainability is something that the discussion papers, “Blueprint for the Bush” (Department of Communities, and Agforce Queensland, 2005) is trying to encourage in regional Queensland and, so far, indications are that education and training are essential elements in the delivery of flexible, responsive, and affordable services. LNQ is well placed to support community and

non-government organizations' needs in this area.

Ongoing discussions between the Lifelong Learning Council of Queensland and the state government as to the recognition of lifelong learning in policy have, to date, not been successful, but LLCQ and LNQ are still committed to this outcome.

PEDAGOGY

LNQ has been a Registered Training Organization since 1999 and has developed large amounts of curriculum for the courses on its scope of registration. With our history and knowledge of the support required for external tertiary students, and the increased use of computers for teaching, we have to be very aware of the needs of our learners.

LNQ has found that it is not appropriate to use online teaching methods for most of our older students as they have often not used a computer before and could be afraid of the technology and of the classroom situation. Many of them are disengaged learners and need a very supportive environment in which to relax and begin their learning journeys. The development of self-confidence and motivation is often assisted by our very skilled presenters who offer continuing over-the-shoulder support until the learner is able to work independently.

Training materials are put together using a team approach, where subject matter experts work with users, clients, technical staff, and presenters to come up with the most appropriate methods of training. The use of relevant examples for different learning groups is also important, and with each new project we examine the needs of the learners. For example, livestock producers are given special training on Excel spreadsheets in order to be able to take part in the National Livestock Identification Scheme (NLIS). Extensive use of the Internet in searching tasks has been made relevant to the interests of the class, and some classes have developed their own websites for community use.

PARTNERSHIPS

Other than its complementary relationship with local councils, state government departments, and other education and training providers across rural, regional, and remote Queensland, LNQ has also formed a number of partnerships with a range of agencies, local businesses, and corporations, including the following:

- BHP Mitsubishi Alliance (BMA): BMA co-funds three LNQ centres in the central mining towns of Dysart, Blackwater, and Moranbah. LNQ delivers training programs for mine workers, partners and the general community.
- CISCO: an LNQ technological partner.
- Comalco: LNQ has developed courses for partners of mine workers.
- Department of Primary Industries, AgForce, Meat and Livestock Association: LNQ provides training support for the National Livestock Identification Scheme.
- Greening Australia: LNQ provides e-conferencing support.
- Griffith University: LNQ provides e-conferencing support for Griffith Law advice to rural communities.
- E-democracy: LNQ provides training and technological support for e-democracy initiatives in rural and remote Queensland.
- Microsoft: an LNQ technological partner.
- Open Universities Australia (OUA): an LNQ member and supporter of the Unilearn program for bridging courses and study skills.
- QGAP (shared services): co-location in Mt Morgan.
- Southern Queensland Institute of TAFE: support and collaboration in the south-west.
- State Library Queensland: a partner in our IT Very Remote project.
- Telstra Country Wide: an LNQ technological partner.
- Volante: an LNQ technological partner.
- Western Mining Corporation: LNQ has developed courses for partners of mine workers.

These partnerships lead to more community members coming through the centre doors and develop larger networks that open up opportunities for training business and industry groups.

PATHWAYS – THE UNILEARN PROGRAM

Each course of study should be understood “as a human activity, a social phenomenon and part of human culture” (Hersh, 1997). This statement by Reuben Hersh, in his attempt to answer the question “What is Mathematics Really?”, describes the philosophy embraced in the design

and delivery of the UNILEARN preparatory and bridging courses generated at LNQ. These courses provide opportunities for alternative pathways to tertiary studies for mature-age learners, and school leavers. They include Introductory and Senior Mathematics, Chemistry, Biology, Physics, and Academic Literacy Skills. These pathways can also lead to entry to the defence forces, pilot training, and other professions for which applicants, through conventional channels, may not have acquired the necessary levels of academic achievement.

Although presented in the external mode, the flexible self-paced features of the UNILEARN courses demand a pedagogy which nurtures the motivation of the learner to achieve success. Writing in a guest editorial in *Mathematics Today* Alexandre Borovik (2005) described an effective mathematics teacher as “a diagnostician and communicator”. This description equally applies to all discipline areas of the UNILEARN courses and illustrates the role of the course tutors in being a source of high-level guidance and support for the learner. This role is also influenced by the benchmark developed by Jerome Bruner and quoted by Malcolm Knowles (1990) in *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* as “Intellectual development depends upon a systematic and contingent interaction between tutor and learner”. Learning in the distance mode can present problems for some students, as indicated in a University of New England report on drop-out rates of external students (UNE survey, 2005). However, the special approach adopted by UNILEARN tutors minimises the isolation factor for students.

Research for the continuing improvement of these courses is an ongoing priority activity, and feedback from students is a vital component of that research. UNILEARN students have responded positively to the philosophy of learning in the courses that are based firmly on individually-directed support by a variety of communication methods. Some recent anonymous feedback from students completing the courses is below:

Overall, I thought that the course works very well. I found the methods of getting help very good. I especially liked the quick responses, given my time limit! The modules themselves are well set, and explain things well.

Overall, however, Unilearn is a fantastic resource. It is tough to successfully study away from a school, but is achievable with lots of support and encouragement. As long as LNQ

focuses on that, it really is an outstanding option for a wide range of students.

Thank you for the attention you have given me. You have graded my progress tests with care and have provided excellent feedback.

Unilearn has provided me with opportunities and a chance to expand my future career options. The book content is easy to follow, and if there are difficulties, the tutors are always able to help in some way. Thank you for your help and for the opportunities that you have given me.

OTHER PATHWAYS

Other pathways for the funded courses are encouraging, showing that students often move from low self-esteem through attempting part-time work, study or volunteering within their community, to full-time work and study – often over an extended period. Our destination surveys show this trend again and again (LNQ project reports for PYC, BITES, and BTW, 2003-2005).

CONCLUSION

The opportunities that lifelong learning offers to participants are immense, especially when the approaches to pedagogy, partnerships, and future pathways are managed appropriately.

A supportive, small-group environment is the best way to engage adult learners. Online environments are not always suitable but a blend of different teaching methods can work. The use of relevant curriculum, examples, and assessment can make the learning journey a journey of discovery.

Having relevant partnerships with industry, government, and community groups can improve the application of curriculum and the reach of lifelong learning in communities. Creating pathways is part of this process as well as providing excellent bridging courses for new learners to use.

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