

# Australian Flexible Learning Framework

## Supporting Flexible Learning Opportunities

### From Content to Construction: Investigating teacher readiness in the uptake of collaborative online techniques

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#### Executive Summary

This report sets out the activities, outcomes and recommendations of the *From Content to Construction* Applied Research project. This project has been conducted as part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's 2003 research program. This program focuses on pedagogical, technical and managerial aspects of flexible learning in Vocational Education and Training (VET), with specific reference to e learning. The 2003 projects aim to provide a resource, which will inform policy makers of the systemic barriers to e-learning implementation and provide practical strategies for consideration.

(Daniell 2000) reported that many VET practitioners felt that they were not proficient enough with computers and the Internet to the degree envisaged as necessary for the effective application of online learning approaches with their target groups. She recommended professional development as a key area for strategic action, in order to increase the uptake of online learning in the groups targeted in that report, i.e. aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, people with disabilities and learners from a Non-English Speaking Background (NESB).

This applied research project targets one of these equity groups, albeit indirectly in that it specifically targets teachers of learners who speak English as a Second Language. It aims to document when and how teachers are moving their learners from behind the screen to in front of the keyboard. It reports on teacher perceptions and teacher readiness in going and staying online, as well as documenting the successful strategies that ESL teachers have adopted while doing so. The findings from this research should be applicable to a wide range of equity groups facing barriers in the uptake of online learning opportunities.

The methodology involved qualitative and quantitative approaches. These approaches included:

- ❖ A literature review, which informed the data collection instruments.
- ❖ An online survey administered by AMES and directed at ESL teachers Australia wide
- ❖ Seven case study interviews with ESL teachers involved in computer mediated instruction as part of their ESL delivery. Three of the case study interviews were selected from nominees from the online survey and four were selected through discussions with the project team and reference group.

The data confirms that online collaboration on a local and global level, and the use of the tools and platforms that make this possible, is not a mainstream activity in ESL in Australia. Although there is a small and possibly growing group of teachers out there using online collaborative tools in creative and innovative ways, this group is still the minority. The survey reveals that there are some significant barriers to overcome. There is a strong perception amongst teachers (57%) that their learners do not have the skills to collaborate online, and teachers themselves feel that teaching online requires a significant level of technical expertise (84%). They also feel (88%) that in order for them to be effective online, they need to know more about how to facilitate online learning.

However, some positive trends are emerging. Sixty-six (66%) of teachers surveyed indicated that they were convinced of the benefits of online collaboration in ESL teaching. Some online tools such as email have become ubiquitous, and as teachers and learners become more familiar with this relatively “low tech” tool, the ways in which it will be used to support language delivery will grow if adequate support mechanisms are in place. Teachers (73%) feel that email and other forms of online communication have made them more accessible than in the traditional face-to-face only classroom, and 93% agree or strongly agree that the online environment can be motivating for learners. There is also a strong agreement (89%) that computer based activities and online activities in particular can be liberating for shy and quiet learners, and that the asynchronous nature of some online tools benefit learners by allowing time for processing information (93%). They also feel (71%) that issues of safety, confidentiality and trust would not stop them from introducing their learners to a global online environment.

The Internet is widely used in CALL classrooms and the use of specific learner in management systems in the support of ESL is growing with 35% of teachers using online platforms to support ESL. Teachers are becoming more familiar with online tools and are looking for and finding ways to integrate them – the next step is to give them support in exploring the pedagogy of online collaboration, as only 42% agreed and 10% strongly agreed with a statement that they received adequate support and training to confidently taking their learners online.

The research concludes that online collaboration and the use of the tools and platforms that make this possible, is not a mainstream activity in ESL in Australia. Although there is a small and possibly growing group of teachers who are using online collaborative tools in creative and innovative ways, this group is still a minority. The data reveals that there are some significant barriers to overcome. The primary issues that have emerged from both the online survey and the case study interviews are:

- ❖ professional development: awareness and understanding of the benefits of online tools and their potential for integration
- ❖ time to develop skills and prepare teaching and learning activities
- ❖ resourcing issues such as hardware, software bandwidth and technical support.

The issues are discussed in detail in section 9 of this report. The recommendations are also referenced to the related data in the report.

## Recommendations

### National

1. FLAG develops a national strategy to support communities of practice of equity teachers. For example reserve a portion of LearnScope funds to support the development of networks, which will enable equity teachers (such as teachers of NESB learners) to source and develop collaborative projects across state boundaries. (p. 37)
2. FLAG request the toolbox management team to commission a project on State and/or National level to examine the need to customise toolboxes for equity learner groups, specifically focussing on the most commonly delivered units of competency, and providing practical examples of how socio-constructivist approaches can inform teaching and learning strategies. (p. 46)
3. FLAG commissions a resource (similar to the Quick Guides) that demonstrates how specific collaborative tools can be integrated into competencies across a range of appropriate language and literacy certificates as well as specific training package units accessed by equity groups. (p. 44)
4. FLAG takes up the points raised in the pocket research “Measuring Teacher Time in Flexible Learning” and continues to work towards funding models and SCH formulae which reflect the uptake of more flexible, online forms of delivery. (p 54)
5. ANTA’s planning processes acknowledge the need for “built in **and** bolted on” approaches to equity groups in VET. (p.56)

### State / RTO

6. That RTOs actively pursue professional development opportunities for ESL staff that provide teachers with a theoretical understanding and a model of constructivist teaching supported by online tools in particular. (p. 31)
7. That RTOs draw on an action-learning professional development model as suggested by McPherson (2002), which integrates professional development in socio-constructivism within a planning and development cycle. (p. 33)
8. That RTOs investigate the specific technical support, equipment and access needs of ESL teachers currently using networked computers in CALL. (p. 28)
9. That RTOs acknowledge the increased workload that is a result of going online, and work with ESL teachers to prepare a set of guidelines (e.g. How to manage your Online Teacher workload on the VLC) for teaching practices that manage workloads. These would assist teachers and managers to implement flexible learning with a realistic understanding of what is involved and within the unavoidable constraints of a budget. ( p. 54)
10. That RTOs consider the uptake of the successful model that has emerged from this research and investigate the feasibility of appointing a co-ordinator position that will support teachers in the classroom and model good practice around the integration of online tools appropriate to individual teaching situations. (p.43)

## From Content to Construction

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