

# **Dancing with Information and Communication Technologies: A Case Study of Education Queensland's Virtual Schooling Service Dance Course**

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The Virtual Schooling Service (VSS) is a nationally and internationally recognized exemplar of excellence in distance education using flexible delivery strategies and a range of learning technologies. The newest subject of the VSS, Dance, sustains quality learning environments that engage students and broaden their horizons for future endeavors, whilst also assisting marginalized students to reach their learning potential.

This paper will outline the World Dance unit embedded within the VSS Dance Course, and in particular will discuss an innovative, international project that utilized videoconferencing technology to create a collaborative choreographic environment between two indigenous groups of students. Some of the strategies used, positive outcomes and obstacles encountered will be presented, but furthermore, future pathways of the key components of the Dance course will also be presented in an effort to display real sustainability of dance education in Queensland's (QLD) secondary schooling system.

## **A Smart Context for VSS**

*Queensland the Smart State Education and Training Reforms for the Future* (ETRF) (2002a) is a reform package driven by the QLD government's Smart State agenda that recognizes the need to engage all students in learning so that they complete either 12 years of schooling or some form of substantial vocational or university qualification. Information and communication technologies (ICTs) are a significant component of the ETRF.

To support QLD teachers in the use of ICTs as everyday tools for learning, the *ICTs for Learning* (Education Queensland, 2003a) strategy has also been developed. This strategy aims to improve ICT access and ICT skills of students and teachers, connect more computers to the internet, deliver extra computers for students, replace old computers and improve ICT support.

In the spirit of the *ICTs for Learning* (Education Queensland, 2003a) strategy, the VSS uses an audiographic conferencing system, combined with an Internet-based Learning Management System (LMS) and the capabilities of videoconferencing to build innovative teaching and learning environments. This means students across the state are able to access improved curriculum options in innovative environments which as Cardon (2000) has found, can assist in retaining students in schools. In “allowing school students and teachers to participate in a networked learning community...[the VSS] also...support[s] a collaborative learning process” (Education Queensland, 2003b: 7) which is “even more important for students who are disadvantaged as it is the social relationships of learning as much as the cognitive demands that facilitate engagement with learning” (Blackmore, Hardcastle, Bamblett & Owens, 2003: 194).

### **VSS Dance**

Dance would not normally be available in all schools across QLD because of the lack of staff expertise or the fact that low student numbers do not warrant specialist teachers. However because many schools have videoconferencing technology the highly specialized and practical curriculum can now be delivered from one point to many across QLD because of the innovative practices of the VSS. This means the delivery of quality curriculum, pedagogy and assessment in Dance is now possible for those students who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity in their local setting.

### **Project Background of “Dance in Australia and New Zealand”**

The dance project “Dance in Australia and New Zealand” primarily involved twelve students (11 Indigenous) from a state school in QLD's south west, the VSS Dance teacher who is based at another location in QLD and two different groups of Maori students currently studying in New Zealand. This means there were four groups of participants at four videoconferencing sites who would collaborate weekly to work in what most researchers term ‘a networked learning community’. Supporting and supervising the students at each site were Principals, other teachers, school support staff, Elders, community personnel and parents.

For twelve weeks the sites were linked for one hour every Wednesday, courtesy of the New Zealand Ministry of Education, so that the students could interact live with their peers across the Tasman to exchange ideas, provide immediate feedback and share cultural aspects unique to each community of

learners within the context of World Dance. This was facilitated by the project leader whose goal was to create a cross-cultural collaborative dance work to performance standard based on traditional movements in a global classroom that fostered honesty and respect. Specifically this project would provide a vehicle for the students to bring their traditional dances into the classroom.

## **Literature Review**

Based on a state-wide examination of current policy documents, which reflect national agendas, four approaches stood out as particularly applicable to the school, the students and the wider community in terms of aligning with this project. The *Partners for Success* (2002b) strategy which focuses on delivering improved outcomes for Indigenous students; the *ICTs for Learning* (2003a) policy which aims to improve ICT access and ICT skills of students and teachers; *The Arts 1-10 Syllabus* (2002c) which intends to improve the status of the Arts in daily life; and the *Rural and Remote Education Framework for Action* (2003b) which recognizes that the characteristics of rural and remote communities are unique, and that the learning contexts and needs of students in these communities are varied, all contributed to this project as driving forces.

Contemporary research, including MCEETYA (2000); Meredyth (1999), Wenglinsky (1999); Comber and Green (1999); Lankshear et al. (1997); and Bamblett, Blackmore, Hardcastle and Owens, (2003), indicates that ICTs can have very positive effects for students' cognitive and social demands at school. And positive outcomes are particularly relevant to this project because "for too long Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students have performed at lower levels than non-Indigenous students" (Education Queensland, 2002b:1). Interestingly enough further research from MCEETYA (2000) highlights how emerging technologies can specifically upgrade and extend Indigenous students' learning and as Bourke, Rigby and Burden, (2000) note, this can encourage Indigenous people to take a greater interest in school and recognise that school is important.

Research also reveals that the Arts "play important roles in expressing and sharing the vitality of cultures and communities, in constructing personal and cultural identities, and in transmitting values and ideas" (Education Queensland, 2002c: 1). For Indigenous cultures this is acutely significant because of their dismissal of 'text' as a way to produce and memorize important social, religious and customary law and conventions. An analysis of literature and of regional events around Australia intensifies this notion because of the understanding that performance is the key to social interaction

and to the preservation of traditions. A testimony to this is in Education Queensland's *Education and Training Reforms for the Future White Paper* (2002a) which advocates the Arts as a vehicle to re-engage all young people with the learning process. Sadly though, research on Indigenous perceptions of how holistic the Arts really are in schools in terms of being culturally inclusive ashamedly points out that Indigenous songs and dance are really only valued for special occasions like National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) week. A final note highlighted in the literature is that in contemporary education "boys participation remains concentrated in subjects traditionally seen as 'male appropriate'" (MCEETYA, 1997: 7) however this again stresses the non-Indigenous position of many of our education authorities, because dance in Indigenous culture is important to both males and females.

It seemed that the three underpinning visions of this project which were to improve the learning opportunities in dance; maximise the videoconferencing technology by linking cultures from around the world in practical curriculum; and increasing the level of community involvement in the school could be achieved.

### **Project Strategies and Stages**

There were four main steps in this project, which aimed to reach three goals and concluded with five distinct milestones. This all occurred over six months. The first goal which the National Strategy for the Education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (2002) urges was to increase the involvement of community members in the school. This was especially significant for improving the relationship between the school and the Indigenous community, and therefore the academic levels of the students, because like many historical documents, educational programs have often been "developed on the assumption that [others] knew what was good for Indigenous people" (MCEETYA, 2000: 16). The second goal was for the students to prepare two traditional Indigenous dances and one collaborative dance work via videoconferencing. This mode of dance making has been used for artistic presentations, but based on an Internet review of the use of videoconferencing for dance education (see: <http://arts.internet2.edu/fall2002-perfevent.html>, <http://www.wwsd.org/backgrnd.html>, <http://www.art.net/resources/dtz/archive/DanceTech99/0504.html>, [http://www.satorimedia.com/hands\\_on/icmc1.htm](http://www.satorimedia.com/hands_on/icmc1.htm), <http://arts.internet2.edu/stompdance.html>) it appears that it has never been used as an ongoing pedagogical tool for school aged students. It is most commonly used to make random links between organisations, but never at such a dynamic and

innovative level as demanded by this project. The third goal was to make a trip to New Zealand. This trip needed to incur no cost, based on the economic position of the families, meaning another form of discrimination that is often felt by Indigenous people would be removed.

In an effort to reach these goals, the first step was to create a partnership with New Zealand teachers and Principals so that a communication pathway was opened. Teleconferencing, provided by Education Queensland was the mode of delivery for this and it was via this technology that the first milestone was reached. The New Zealand Ministry of Education agreed to pay for all of the videoconferencing costs which amounted to approximately \$14 000. The second stage involved heavy consultation with the Queensland school and the community of the town which meant friends, family, students (who identified themselves), Elders, liaison officers, teachers from that site and government identities were asked for comments. This step was also essential so that the Elders could select an Indigenous performing arts teacher to work with the project leader. The second milestone was achieved at this stage when approximately forty parents, friends and students presented themselves at a parent/teacher afternoon that was conducted via videoconferencing. The next stage involved practical implementation of the project across all four sites. The students from both countries were required to prepare two Indigenous dances, and participate in the preparation of one collaborative dance, which itself was a milestone in terms of dance education. This was a powerful step for satisfying Queensland's rural education strategy because the technology enabled a larger community of peers to work together which is noteworthy because "it is the social relationships of learning as much as the cognitive demands that facilitate engagement with learning" (Blackmore, Hardcastle, Bamblett & Owens, 2003: 194). The final step involved sourcing and securing approximately \$18 000 to enable the twelve students, the project leader, two teachers from the school, the Indigenous dance teacher, two parents and one government administrator to travel to New Zealand. Achieving this goal was another fine milestone.

### **Evaluation Mechanisms**

To monitor the impact of the change and to evaluate the overall success of the project, ongoing collection of data was essential to assess the skill development of the students, their change in confidence level and whether or not this project made the school experience more enjoyable for all. The students were required to complete Likert-style surveys and short answer questionnaires pre-, during and post- project as it was important to assess, based on a modified Biggs (1987) inventory,

how the students approached the project and what their attitudes towards it were. The students, the Indigenous Liaison Officer and the site teacher also participated in interviews with the project leader so that qualitative data could be collected about how enjoyable the collaboration was, and how the students felt about the trip to New Zealand. The project leader also traveled out to the site at a mid-point in the project to gather anecdotal evidence, and because videoconferencing allows vision, the numbers of guests, including parents, in attendance were noted for each lesson.

## **Outcomes**

The overall impact this project had on the school community and on the professional practices within the school was positive. The Principal felt resilience was promoted within the community based on the optimistic activities to build pride within the students. The Rural Youth Worker noted that this tangible method of connecting with another group presents not only active and motivated citizenship in one's own community but also in the world, and the local Indigenous Project Manager, and the previous Indigenous Liaison Officer of the school highlighted how this project could empower the community. Furthermore, from the perspective of improving relationships, at most lessons an average of two parents were present with some lessons welcoming as many as eight. It was noted in the feedback that this is an important link that needs strengthening at this school, and this project has helped to do this. Other significant impacts this project had on the wider community are evident in the considerable donation of money to enable the students to travel overseas. This display of generosity not only reflects the integral role that schools play in rural towns, but also indicates the value the companies, both local and national placed on the project.

The Parents and Citizens President noted how the project promoted growth of the students in every way. The Indigenous Liaison Officer of the school, believes this was a once in a lifetime chance for the students to broaden their minds, and the Rural Youth Worker also pointed out that the students' awareness and use of cutting edge technology was a crucial part of the project, because of its ability to enable real life learning situations beyond the confines of the traditional classroom boundaries.

The students' own responses were overwhelmingly positive too. 100% said that they were glad the project had happened, 100% felt that school had improved and 100% noted that they were more confident within themselves. The reasons for this shift in confidence included 'meeting people from

another country', 'sharing cool dance moves', 'building pride in ourselves', 'using videoconferencing', 'learning about another culture', 'not to be shame' and 'learning about differences'. Furthermore, 100% declared their dancing had improved, and 95% stated that they were more confident dancers. To consolidate these findings, the students elaborated by pointing out they were able to 'learn deadly dances', 'share cool dance moves' and 'to be more proud of their traditional dances'. The data also shows that deep level learning was occurring (see Biggs, 1987). These findings were reinforced by formal assessments given by the Indigenous Liaison Officer, the site teacher and the project leader, who were asked to comment about the students' approach to dance class and how the students' learning outcomes had improved. On a scale from one to ten (one was deemed 'non-existent' and ten was deemed 'outstanding'), the mean result pre project was 5.083, with a standard deviation of 1.26 and post project was 8.16, with a standard deviation of 1.21.

Finally, the three most powerful responses from the students were 'making me want to come to school', 'having fun' and 'looking forward to something at school'. And when asked why these sorts of feelings existed, the students responded with comments, which reflect much of the literature, like 'having community involvement', 'being able to express my thoughts more clearly', 'working as a team', 'feeling supported', 'being able to learn about our culture', 'learning about our dance off other Aboriginals' and 'because I was allowed to be myself'.

### **Future Pathways – Sustainability**

Following the evaluation of the project five features stand out as exemplary practice that could be sustained and improved, and this is important for dance education in QLD. Firstly, the students now have a formalised and rehearsed Indigenous dance group that could continue to perform around the region and develop as a cohesive unit. And, because Education Queensland has recently mandated dance as part of the curriculum up to Grade Seven, this group could travel to neighbouring schools and communities to perform as role models and as ambassadors of their school, but also to promote the Indigenous presence within the region. Furthermore, the group could expand within the school so as to strengthen the existence of the performing arts, and continue the strong commitment to the community. Secondly, the project leader is currently facilitating a departmentally recognised videoconferencing course to three teachers at the school. This professional commitment to the growth of colleagues and others in the district is in an effort to build a cluster of teachers who feel confident and competent with the medium. The third sustainable feature of the program reflects the help that teachers need in

implementing the new Arts syllabus. The positive growth of the site teacher's skills and knowledge pertaining directly to dance means she was then able to:

- perform actions with correct alignment, focus, dynamics and spatial awareness;
- create new movements which showed an understanding of artistic intent and form;
- communicate via various mediums using specific terminology to express aesthetic responses to dance; and
- guide the students whilst under her care in all of the above at a satisfactory level.

This has been a lighthouse outcome that can be transplanted to almost any school that requires assistance. The fourth sustainable feature of this project has been the development of a stronger community commitment within the school. Future dance units for the students will be made in consultation with the families and Elders to ensure that the material is appropriate, responsive and enjoyable, and in doing this it is hoped that the families will continue to feel welcome in the classroom. The final possibility that will be investigated is the chance of the New Zealand students coming to Australia to share their culture too.

## **Conclusion**

It was acknowledged very early that the project "Dance in Australia and New Zealand" could expand and improve the schooling experience for all students involved by opening up a new opportunity that would be characterized by state of the art curriculum and pedagogy in Dance. Specifically, the justification of this project was underpinned by the need to firstly determine an appropriate and creative method for delivering content around the theme of 'World Dance', by secondly maximising the potential of the on-site videoconferencing technology, and thirdly by opening up an opportunity for more community members to be involved in the school. It was hoped that by addressing these factors the students' and community's perceptions of the Performing Arts would be broadened, whilst also encouraging them to view the world more critically; inspiring them to recognize the globalized nature of our world; enthusing them to embrace ICTs as a means to better access the world's resources; and motivating the students to feel ownership of their dances. This meant the unit content and the teaching methods had to avoid cultural alienation and instead be bolstered by an ultimate desire to provide a series of learning activities that would aim to enhance the students' pride in their culture and as a result become more confident in their learning.



In fact the project did succeed in reaching all of these goals, whilst also setting a precedent for integrating ICTs fully into secondary Dance courses. And although the VSS has a history of being a leader in distance education both nationally and internationally, this newest project truly substantiates the notion of sustaining quality learning environments that engage students and broaden their horizons for future endeavors. In particular, the “Dance in Australia and New Zealand” project vastly impacted on the Indigenous students of the school by assisting them to reach their learning potential in a unique and innovative educational experience.

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