

Sabbatical Report

Digital learning opportunities maximised through clusters

Student learning via distant learning using various forms of communication in rural situations can be enhanced by clustering schools

Ross Brockbank South Westland Area School Term 2, 2016.

The use of technology is an effective way of enhancing learning opportunities for students and teaching staff. Combining the resources of schools in clusters is an effective way of overcoming the issues of small schools where teachers particularly in the Secondary area are often a single Teacher in Charge (TICs) of a subject area, or teaching in a non specialist subject area or a subject cannot be offered due to various reasons. All these issues put extra pressure on schools, on teachers and potentially decrease the quality of opportunities for students.

The concept that distance learning was an effective way of learning, was fundamental, as was the concept that the quality of teaching was just as relevant in distance learning, as in the normal classroom situation. From personal experience I had also found that learning to use the various distance learning technologies and the planning and organisation required to provide a student centred programme, was very important, and relevant professional development for the teacher.

I have had a student achieve a scholarship through distance learning who went on to get a Law degree and his choice of a Law firm to work in. He expressed that he considered his point of difference to the Law Firm was that he had been able to achieve via this medium. This would clearly indicate to me that distance learning can clearly be considered a positive rather than a second best.

The belief that students learn better when they perceive the classroom environment more positively, is as relevant to the distance learning environment as it is for the normal classroom. Therefore the quality of programme delivery and support is important.

Of particular interest is the type and impact of learning support played in the success of distance learning. School and Teacher support was essential to produce distance learners, who are able to not only to achieve success but develop as confident, positive independent learners.

Whilst visiting schools I took particular interest in the support students received within their school, as well as the quality of the programmes provided, and the equipment and software used to support them.

From observation, the quality of support within the school had a lot to do with the time and skills of the person providing the guidance. The person appeared to be more important than their title. The right Teachers' Aide was effective in the right environment. It certainly was beneficial when the person was skilled and confident in the use of technology and had the time and developed a good rapport with students to be effective. A skilled teacher, who had preferably used the technologies themselves in a teaching environment, was particularly

beneficial. These skills would also appear to be of significant benefit when transferred to their normal classrooms, as the use of good pedagogy is usually good learning.

If we work on the premise that distance learning is not just valuable to a school to increase opportunities for students, but also the skills of teaching staff, then it is worth developing further. For students it will not only increase opportunities that they might otherwise not have, but also increase the flexibility for students to learn in a way, and at a time that suits them. It could also give them a potential point of difference and enhance their independent learning skills. For teaching staff the benefits will be increased skills and more student centred learning. These are very valid reasons to provide the opportunities and the support they require.

Examples where Teacher/student relationships had been established over time were just as effective as in the normal classroom setting. Teaching relationships remain very important and the need for High Quality Teachers just as important. The challenge will be how to formalise this and not to rely on ad hoc developments. This could well be an effective way in which schools in a Kahui Ako could work together to effectively enhance the skills of teachers and the opportunities for their students. Most Kahui Ako had a range of formal and informal interactions even before forming into a formal cluster and this means a lot of people in these schools are already familiar with each other. Building on this would relatively quickly increase learning opportunities. In the case of Area School Clusters, the two South Island clusters are based around long established connections which means there is already a lot in common. This is a very good basis to build on.

I focussed on visiting small rural schools in New Zealand and in Alberta, Canada. I chose Alberta because of many similarities in terms of scale to New Zealand, with Alberta having around 4 million people. The trip however was interrupted by the wild fires that affected Northern Alberta so this affected what was planned in Canada.

I observed a variety of approaches to providing courses over distance. There was clearly a place for 1:1 through Skype, Hangouts and a place for 1: 2-5 through Hangouts, video conferencing etc. Students appeared to appreciate having a dedicated distance learning area, where they were working with other students in a similar learning environment and were very enthusiastic about having regular scheduled meetings with their supervisor and/or a teacher within school where possible.

Interestingly the ability to be able to contact their teacher through various methods was also important, although it was noted that there is a tension between the availability of teachers. This needs to be clarified in terms of times when staff are available because staff cannot be expected to not have a personal life and some form of supervision for safety would also need to be considered. The planning and organisation of material/timelines/assessments was generally very good in courses observed, clearly indicating the transferability of this planning for teachers to their other classes. Clear processes and responsibilities around the supply of Texts, workbooks etc., and the transfer of resources generally was varied. This would appear to be an area in which Kahui Ako's could again take a lead. Access of students to technology was also variable.

A particular highlight was the visit to Alberta Distance Learning Centre (ADLC) who provide on-line courses for school students and teachers.

I would have liked to have had more time to follow up on a programme that was described to me, where they provide the course materials and mentoring for teachers, teaching in subject areas other than their specialist areas in small isolated schools. This would appear to have huge potential to support our staff and improve outcomes for our students where there schools may be lacking a specialist teacher.

Teachers were almost unanimous in their support for any process that overcame the difficulties or concerns around professional isolation and the support that came from sharing units of work, assessments and there pre-moderation and the moderation of the assessments. Generally having small numbers of students was seen as not always helpful in establishing grade boundaries etc.

It is very clear that there is a range of technologies that are working, teachers are appreciative of the extra support and some even felt that the use of technology and clustering with staff in a similar situation had the potential to decrease their workload and increase their skills and accuracy. Students are benefiting from this form of learning although probably one subject was considered enough. There is a potential to not only provide courses to individual students at NCEA but also to provide extension opportunities and or courses across the whole school.

All these positives make it well worth the time and investment to continue to develop these initiatives.