Pasifika Communities Online: And Implications

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ABSTRACT

Research into how e-learning can best be used to meet the needs of Pasifika communities within New Zealand is embryonic. This paper outlines some of the issues and experiences of Pasifika students, suggests best practices to be employed to promote successful online experiences and highlights key issues for further research in this area

INTRODUCTION

Research on intranet and internet activities for Pasifika peoples and multi-cultural users is still in its infancy (Clayton, 2001; Rata Skudder, Angeth, & Clayton, 2003). Currently there does not appear to be a significant body of theory that is widely accepted as informing online practice for Pasifika peoples. While distance education theories and studies in online learning could be regarded as helpful and relevant they fail to critically examine the specific e-learning environment created for Pasifika peoples or the interactions that take place within it. This paper explored a group of Pasifika people's reactions to "online" learning using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

CONTEXT

BEST Training is the largest Pacific Tertiary Provider in the country with a mission to work with Pacific people to fulfil the educational vocational and business aspirations of Pacific Islands communities. BEST's students could be identified as 'disadvantaged' in the tertiary education system with 52% of students having no full formal qualification and 73% indicating NCEA Level 1 is their highest level of academic achievement.

Since 2001, factors such as, perceived new markets, opportunity to bridge "digital divide", competitive advantage, demand for increased flexibility by

students and industry have led BEST into providing e-learning opportunities for students. Early indications appeared to indicate blended delivery extended BEST's student community to students who would otherwise be excluded from study because of family and work commitments (Vautier, Hendrikse & Rata-Skudder, 2003). From the initial 79 students in 2001, BEST's e-learning roll increased to 298 in 2003.

Typically, students enrolled at BEST have limited access to technology. To overcome these limitations students who are enrolled in the e-learning option are provided with the necessary ICT equipment (computer, printer, Internet connection, computer table and chair) and connections. Students' limited academic and study skills are to some extent overcome by participation in an intensive three week induction programme including team building, computer training, and strategies for becoming a successful online learner. On completion of induction learners regularly attend two half day face to face sessions with the remaining 22 hours completed from home.

RESEARCH APPROACH

For over 30 years researchers have found the perceptions of participants undertaking educational activities, provide a comprehensive insight of the environment they work within. Their reactions to and perceptions of their environment have a significant impact on their performance (Fraser, 2001; Yarrow, Millwater, & Fraser, 1997). Fraser & Tobin (1991), a decade ago were conscious researchers in the field of educational evaluation who saw merit in combining qualitative and quantitative methods in the same study. Tobin & Fraser (1998) have used the metaphoric term of 'Bricolage' (p623) to describe the 'patchwork' combination of qualitative and quantitative methods in investigating learning environments.

This study is focused on investigating the perceptions of Pasifika people's participation within their e-environment using both quantitative and qualitative methods. It was anticipated this approach would firstly, provide valuable insights of the e-environment and secondly, could lead to identifying strategies and techniques to enhance the e-environment for this group.

FINDINGS OF EXPLORATORY STUDIES

Quantitative

Background

Conducting surveys over the internet offers significant advantages (Solomon, 2001) and the results obtained are as reliable as conventional "pen and paper' questionnaires (Baron & Siepmann, 2000; Carini et al., 2001). Internet based surveys make the collection, storage and manipulation of data generated an attractive and cost effective option and therefore was the method chosen in this research study.

The online form used "drop-down" menus to firstly, obtain background information to stratify the sample if necessary and secondly, used a five point ordinal scale to investigate student perceptions of their computer competence, the appeal of material presented, the organization of the material presented and student's perceptions of the benefits of online learning.

Sample

The sample comprised 32 Pasifika students currently undertaking e-learning courses. There was a minority of males (6/32) and a significant majority were female (26/32). It was also notable that a large number (28/32) were over 20 years of age with half (16/32) were between the ages of 25 – 39. The sample appears to reflect BEST's student profile. The sample also appeared to show a high degree of technological literacy with all (32/32) indicating they used a computer at least 3 times a week or more and, with one exception, indicating they used the internet at least 3 times a week (31/32). This is possibly a reflection of BEST's policy of providing computers and internet connections to e-learning students. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the limited number of participants no attempts were made to structure the data based on gender, age or socio-economic status, although with further data this maybe a worthwhile area to explore.

Analysis and discussion

Computer Competence

To participate fully in e-environments it could be argued learners have to be technologically literate, confident and competent in using a computer (Clayton, 2003). When analyzing the data it was found a significant majority of

participants were confident and competent in using computers (31/32), searching for information using the World Wide Web (29/32), using a web-browser (32/32), reconnecting to the internet when disconnected (30/32) and were capable of storing information on their computer (31/32). On the surface it would appear participants are confident and technologically capable of participating in the e-environment created. However, a majority (18/32) felt they would be unable to find a solution if 'error messages', caused by software or hardware failures, occurred during their learning. This indicates that the provision of a technical helpdesk could be regarded as a crucial service to enable continuing success for this group.

Information design and appeal

It is argued students will perform more productively in their preferred learning environment (Yarrow, Millwater & Fraser, 1997). Therefore, it was hypothesized that if students felt "comfortable" with course material presented they would achieve at a higher standard.

When analysing the data it was found students felt the formatting of the text (31/32) the use of colours in tables and pages (29/32) and the use of images (31/32) enhanced their learning. However, there were some reservations. While students indicated graphics were useful in illustrating main points and aiding understanding (27/32) a significant minority (12/32) found the material visually unappealing and half (17/32) felt the material lacked originality and creativity. These findings indicate materials created for Pasifika peoples should utilize well designed, appealing graphics extensively.

Order and organization

In e-environments with time delayed communication students need to know what is going to happen, what is to be learnt, the purpose of it, and how they will be assessed. Courses need to be well organized and clearly defined if students are to have few problems in following the sequence and making sense of what is to be learnt (Gilbert, Boulter, & Rutherford, 2000; Swaak & De Jong, 2001).

When analyzing the data it was found students felt the learning objectives were clearly presented (30/32), the course well organized and easy to follow (30/32), the information appropriate (32/32), a summary page was included for each topic (31/32), and links to information on the internet were clearly visible and relevant (31/32). It would appear e-environments created for these students are well structured, encourage self paced learning and are appreciated by these learners.

Reflection

(Zariski & Styles, 2000) have speculated e-learning students need to be highly self regulated and be responsible for organizing and reflecting on their learning. They must become self-directed learners.
When analyzing the data it was found student's perceptions of online learning were positive. All participants were satisfied with their experience (32/32). They found using the internet for learning was stimulating (32/32) they had few problems pacing themselves in the learning environment (31/32) and they felt they were in control of their learning (32/32). However, some students did have reservations. More than a third (11/32) did not believe they learned more in the online environment and a similar number (12/32) while agreeing online learning enhanced face-to-face teaching they did not think it should replace it. This may indicate that face-to-face sessions for Pasifika people should be an integral part of e-environments.

Limitations

While the research sample appears to reflect BEST's student profile it should not be regarded as representative of all current or potential students of BEST. Most of the students who participated in this exploratory research had easy access to computers and have frequent face to face assistance from course tutors.

The instrument was heavily weighted towards investigating student perceptions of their computer competence, the appeal of material presented, the organization of the material and how they perceived online learning. It did not fully probe student engagement with the content presented, their online interactions with each other or their online interactions with their tutor.

Qualitative

Background

When researching Pasifika learners the researcher has a social responsibility to use information gathered from students to promote improvement in the experiences of Pasifika, and to ensure that participants have ownership over the research findings (Anae et al, 2001). It has been argued opportunities for the transformation of the e-learning experience for the Pasifika learner are best identified and developed by Pasifika peoples with Pasifika knowledge and values. Access to people's opinions and knowledge is a privilege, not a right and ownership to information remains with the giver (Good, 2001). Focus groups are also considered more appropriate than one to one interviews in

reflecting the norm in Pasifika cultures of verbally experiencing ideas and discussing significant matters within the group (Latu & Young 2004). Therefore, researchers not only have an obligation to empower the participants, ensure participant's thoughts are woven into the research findings, but also ensure the research was undertaken within an appropriate cultural context. In this study participants were offered a small gift in recognition of the information they entrusted, and time invested in the project (Good 2001, Tets 2003). Focus group meetings were accompanied with a meal, as sharing food is a highly communal activity across Pasifika cultures and reinforces the value of reciprocity.

The Tertiary Education Commission (2001) has identified a number of issues as barriers to Pasifika learners' participation in tertiary education. This focus group explored 4 of the issues identified: Socio Economic Factors, Effects of the Digital Divide, Appropriate and Supportive Learning Environments, and Lack of Recognition for Pacific Communities.

Sample

The sample group was small, nine participants, who have successfully completed the Advanced Certificate of Business Administration E-learning course since 2002. The group consisted of one Cook Island, one Niuean, two Tongan, and five Samoan participants. Two were male and seven female. Four of the participants were raised and schooled in New Zealand and five were raised in Pacific Island nations.

Participants ranged in age from 22 yrs to 53 yrs of age. Seven of the participants were over 35 and two of these were over 50 years of age.

Socio Economic Factors

The 2001 census found that the median hourly income for Pacific peoples was $11.70 per hour (Ongley, 2002). These low levels of income meant participants are generally in paid employment while undertaking study. This can be a significant issue as one respondent noted,

> …I was working up to 70 hours a week'. (Participant 2)

As well as work commitments many had childcare and family responsibilities:

> …I normally go and help out my Mum, she stays by herself. It's our responsibility. (Participant 2)

…. I have five children, I've been a solo parent for 11 years, I look after my father and my mother who are both in their seventies, so our household has 8 people. (Participant 7)

It would appear low income levels, work commitments, potential cost for child care and the need to fulfill family obligations made e-learning a very attractive option for these students:

… it's convenient to be with my boys at the same time… it's my top priority, my boys (Participant 5)

…I have got 5 children and I don't have time to go out or do anything. It's the only way I can study. (Participant 4)

…I have a busy lifestyle especially with my children and my newborn…the e-learning option was the best choice. (Participant 9)

Offering blended delivery options in institutions dealing with Pasifika participants could potentially increase participation rates of this group in tertiary education.

Effects of the Digital Divide

The 2001 Census showed that 18% of Pasifika peoples reported living in a household without a telephone and 81% did not have Internet access at home. The lack of exposure to technology by Pacific peoples could be regarded as a barrier to learning:

… Before I came to Best Training I was always busy as a mother, grandmother, and a wife. Taxi driver, a nurse, a doctor, you know because that's what a mother does at home and computer skills never occurred in my mind (Participant 6)

The lack of and availability of resources is also a barrier and it appears courses that include technological hardware costs in the fee structure are very attractive:

…I had never used the internet or email before…I had to learn from scratch (Participant 8)

> …I was really pleased that they provided the computer and that really drew me as well. I couldn't afford a computer at the time. (Participant 3)

> …Being given a whole computer package was amazing especially for the tertiary institute to trust you with their property. (Participant 9)

As participants became familiar with the technologies they appreciated the use of computer and Internet and the positive spin offs this had for themselves, their families and wider communities.

> …it is another advantage for our family, especially for my 2 daughters, the first time I used WebCT, they came up and said "what are you doing daddy" and I said oh "I'm doing my study, my work". "You are doing it from home? You don't need to do it from inside the school, the classroom?" (Participant 1)

It would appear well-resourced courses, with the provision of hardware and software in the course fee structure, not only introduce participants to those technologies, they also encourage their immediate and extended families to participate in tertiary education.

Culturally Appropriate and Supportive Learning Environments

Latu and Young (2004) discuss the strong element of pride and shame in Pacific cultures. They argue that pride or fear of shame may prevent Pasifika students from public participation in learning activities and question asking. It appears crucial that environments created for students are close-knit, family like learning communities with guidance and encouragement provided by supportive facilitators. In this environment the fear of shame is less acute and participation will increase:

> …being in an environment that nurtures the Pacific way of living made me more confident about being who I am and actually going out there – still being able to live my life through e-learning and continue my studies'. (Participant 7)

To many participants the e-learning class relationship was similar to a family relationship. They mentioned the obligatory roles of each member of this family to teach and be taught to nurture and to motivate:

> … We set up a study group…we communicate everyday on email, discussion, chat. We meet outside of class at different houses, we visit others, some of us we go to the gym together. The relationship doesn't stop here. (Participant 3)

> … it's like being in a family group, being in a family environment. It's like an army of people around me to give me that extra hand to enhance my learning ability. (Participant 5)

A key area of support that student identified was regular online and face to face communication with staff:

> …I learned many things that I didn't know about and I'm proud that I've done this. The Tutors were great, always there to support you…my Course Director was always there for encouragement. (Participant 9)

This suggests that regular face to face academic and team building sessions should be a feature of blended courses offered to Pasifika people. Online support also played a significant role in the motivation and achievement of students in the e-environment.

Lack of Recognition for Pacific Communities

A theme that emerged from discussion in the focus group was a failure of educational providers to recognize the diversity of Pasifika cultures and individuals. Care needs to be taken that Pasifika communities are not treated as a homogenous group and efforts are taken by educational providers to cater not only for dominant Pasifika groups but to attempt to reflect and encourage all Pasifika students:

> ...I'm a Tongan, born in Tonga…see all the staff…there's heaps of Samoans…sometimes they talk in Samoan language. You know I'm a different culture…how about Tonga, could someone come and say a few words, so Tongans can be proud of their own country and language? I'm jealous. (Participant 1)

> … I did hang out with other Samoan students…but it was a very different culture. It was very like the Samoan society was doing things the Samoan way and again I didn't fit because I wasn't raised that way. (Participant 7)

Limitations

Our original intent was to hold language specific focus groups facilitated by speaker of the language. Due to the small number of participants and the diversity the participants presented in terms of culture, nationality, language, location, age and experience and availability this was not a feasible approach for this exploratory study. However, it is an approach highly recommended for further research in order to avoid misinterpretation of student opinions and encourage open and confident communication of experiences (Tets Lima 2003, Good 2001, Anae et al 2003).

While the research sample appears to reflect BEST's student profile it must be noted all participants experienced success in e-learning. While the issues raised illuminate best practice, care must be taken not to apply wholesale these findings to all courses offered to Pasifika peoples. Further research should include the perspectives of those who did not successfully complete the programme.

Although levels of literacy were not formally discussed within the focus group students mentioned this as a challenge to their learning. Students also identified a lack of prior classroom experience and academic skills as a real challenge to online learning.

CONCLUSIONS

Educational activity for Pasifika peoples is no longer confined by text, print based materials, time or space. Educationalists are challenged to develop appropriate strategies to deal with new information and communication technology-rich ways of teaching and learning. E-learning offers opportunities for Pasifika learners to overcome hindrances to traditional modes of study. The flexibility that new technologies provide enables learners to manage their time around other important commitments of family, community and employment. Pasifika learners require culturally appropriate systems, environments and strong support structure to ensure success. The exploratory study suggests:

- Firstly, educators should take care to ensure participants are comfortable in the learning environment created. Educators will benefit from recognizing the diversity of Pasifika cultures and experiences.
- Secondly, provision of hardware and software in the course fee structure will introduce participants to technologies and encourage their

immediate and extended families to participate in those technologies and education.

- Thirdly, institutions dealing with Pasifika participants should investigate blended delivery options. This will potentially increase the participation rates of Pacific people in tertiary education.
- Fourthly, team building and regular face-to-face sessions could be a recommended feature of blended courses. Students need to receive regular ongoing support academically and personally.

The demand for more flexibility in education, the improvement in information and communication technological capabilities, and the reducing costs of such technologies are making electronically mediated education for Pasifika peoples increasingly more viable, attractive, cost-effective and valued. As an exploratory study this research highlights the challenges needing to be addressed in order to effectively meet the needs of Pasifika communities. The growth of online educational opportunities for this group needs to be matched by a similar growth in educational research in online education for Pasifika students.

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