



New e-tool bridges cultural gap

Low literacy levels exclude many Indigenous people from gaining post-school qualifications, but Chris Tayler's innovative approach to vocational education is bypassing the barrier with the help of a new e-tool.

When it comes to education across cultural groups, one size does not fit all. Vocational education and training lecturer, Chris Tayler knows too well that the mainstream approach to teaching vocational courses often relies on English language, text-based resources which are inappropriate for many Indigenous people.

TEXT

Robyn McDougall

The consequences of poor literacy levels within indigenous populations are multifarious. Self-esteem, self-respect and confidence are among the first casualties when work and life prospects are limited or non-existent.

ABOVE

Early Child Care lecturer Chris Tayler's new teaching technique appeals to the strengths of Indigenous people.

PHOTOGRAPH

Raquel Dubois

Now, Early Child Care lecturer Ms Tayler has developed an electronic learning tool that appeals directly to the learning styles of Indigenous people. It's visually oriented, has a large component of story-telling and draws on family and community. And it's also helping to equip young women to enter the childcare industry.

"Research has shown that for many Indigenous learners, mainstream education systems don't use teaching processes that appeal to their strengths," Ms Tayler said.

"E-learning approaches to teaching and assessment introduce greater flexibility to the learning environment and are more inclusive of students who cannot engage with mainstream approaches."

She has just completed the first semester-long trial of DIDG Childcare, an e-tool which uses video technology for both teaching and assessment.

DIDG Childcare, named by the students to reflect the digital nature of the tool, aims to raise a new generation of Indigenous childcare workers to work in communities and beyond. The program comprises a database of digital film clips with written explanations and relevant stories about childcare from their own communities. Students use laptop computers to access the video clips which demonstrate the course competencies. They also have small touch screen digital cameras to record themselves for assessment as a means of providing evidence of their competency and achievements.

Once students feel they are ready to be assessed, they have the option of recording themselves as an audio explanation or give an interview on the given performance criteria.

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"The Indigenous students respond better to film clips showing Indigenous interviewees or demonstrators and to working as a group to discuss the content of the clips, including discussions about their own cultural and community context," Ms Tayler said.

"Essentially, DIDG Childcare is an electronic tool box for students.

"Students are able to work at their own pace. The design enables them to take as much time as necessary to consolidate their understanding of the unit content by watching and re-watching clips and listening to audio as often as needed.

"The clips also provide a means of combating absenteeism and increase the potential for academic success because it provides a consistency to the teaching and learning process. No student misses out. They always have access to the video clips when and as often as they need them."

The e-tool was developed as part of the Indigenous Training and Development Project, which is funded by the Red Cross (Northern Territory) Communities for Children Program. The aim is to increase the number of young Indigenous people holding a Certificate III in Children's Services and to increase their career options.

But another dividend of the program is that it is helping to create Indigenous-appropriate services for children.

"Most childcare centres have policies which address cultural inclusion and appropriateness. Having Indigenous people working at the centres will give voice to such policies. Where cultural knowledge and appropriate practice are embedded into the daily provision of care and play experiences, everybody benefits," Ms Tayler said.

The first stage of the training project has just finished at Palmerston's Outside Hours School Care and the signs of success are strong.

"In a cohort of 15 students, two students have begun part and full-time work, another three are in traineeships in the industry," she said.

"Overall, the 10 remaining students (five have withdrawn) have all successfully achieved nine units of the 14 comprising the Certificate III in Children's Services."

It's an encouraging outcome after just one semester of delivery.

One of the great advantages of the program is that it does not depend on the Internet for delivery, making it suitable for remote and regional locations.

But Ms Tayler is not suggesting that the e-tool is a cure-all for Indigenous vocational learning. "As the implementation of electronic databases are for the most part new to VET education within the childcare industry, there are features of the program that require improvements," she said.

"While the responses to the training have generally been positive and there are some good employment and training outcomes emerging, student retention is an issue of some concern.

"And because this is a new way of learning for many, a high degree of support and mentoring is required to make the training work.

"Currently there is a paucity of research that illuminates the distinct differences between the learning style of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, which would justify the need to develop more appropriate methods of teaching. This effectively means that individual teachers must take it upon themselves to bridge the gap to enable Indigenous learners to succeed in mainstream education," she said.

But some unanticipated benefits also are flowing for the women who are taking part, many of whom are young mothers.

Ms Tayler said she has seen evidence that the course is helping the students to better care for their own children.

"This indirect outcome of the project has seen the students apply the knowledge they are gaining to benefit their own parenting skills."



ANTENNAE

This article is based on a paper written by Chris Tayler which she will present to the World Indigenous People's Conference – Education in Melbourne in December.