Beyond Burn Rate: Sustainability Online

by Chris Corbel, Manager Online AMES 2000

Everybody is talking about being online these days. Like many other professionals, teachers are finding themselves with email addresses, websites, and expectations, or even demands, that they use these in some way to enhance the experiences they offer their learners. Many teachers attend professional development activities and in-services, and may undertake longer accredited training. A few, who we read about in the paper or in journals, or who have achieved a kind of local hero status for their computer skills, seem to be on top of it all. Most of us aren't there yet. Nevertheless, there will be a steady increase in uptake of online learning options by teachers, until we're all happily online. It's just a matter of time.

Or is it? I have been involved in the development of two online learning environments, the Victorian TAFE Virtual Campus and the AMES Victoria Virtual Independent Learning Centre, and I would have to say that with both projects we may now be on the point of transition between the uptake by early adopters of an innovation and uptake by the key early majority group (Rogers 1995), the first big wave of users who are not driven by personal interest as such, but are simply taking up an innovation that has now become more clearly defined, and which they feel capable of dealing with. Instead of a smooth transition between stages of adoption we are finding an emerging gap.

We are not the only ones dealing with this gap between early adoption and longer term uptake. Every day we read about another dotcom biting the dust, either going out of business, or being bought up by an established company from the "old economy". Most of these startups have spent millions in establishing themselves not as physical entities, but as virtual entities - recognised brand names that will generate sales through customer recognition and loyalty.

So what's the problem? Why is it that things seem to be stumbling somewhat? For me the issue is same, whether we are talking about teachers taking their work online, or companies taking their business online - sustainability. That is, is it possible to make this thing work over time? Is it realistic to think that this business model, or that teaching approach (two increasingly overlapping concepts!), can really last more than a short time, before the initial funds or enthusiasm simply burn out?

I'd like to explore this idea using our experience with the Virtual Independent Learning Centre (VILC). The Virtual ILC is a service offered by Online AMES to assist teachers to make the most of the emerging online environment. Its basic goal is to make internet use easy to integrate into teachers' everyday work. It offers a realistic way for every teacher to be online, not just those prepared to commit substantial time and effort. It's intended to be, in the words of a best-selling series of computer books "for the rest of us".

The content is in three broad categories - Realweb, Easymedia and Checkout. Realweb contains collections of language learning tasks based on various curriculums. Easymedia provides learning activities based on media resources. Checkout provides a collection of learning and information resources.

The main strand in Realweb is Realweb CSWE, which is a collection of over 500 language learning tasks created by more than 60 language teachers from around Australia, based on the Certificates in Spoken and Written English. A second strand in Realweb is Realweb Industry, which provides tasks based on general

enterprise skills relevant across a range of industry settings. A strand is currently under development for the Curriculum Standards Framework ESL Companion, as well as another one for the CGEA.

The second group of content is Easymedia. It has only one strand at present, Easynews Radio. Easynews Radio is a weekly collection of language learning tasks based on the previous week's SBS Radio News. Users can choose to hear the item, hear it and see the transcript, and/or hear it and do a learning activity. There are up to ten items each week, grouped into intermediate and advanced, and previous weeks' items remain available if a user wanted to follow a particular story over time. There are about half a dozen exercise types, and answers are available immediately.

The third category, Checkout, invites teachers and learners to check out some other general resources. Downunder is a piece of hypertext fiction aimed at language learners. It provides alternative pathways through a story about an alien invasion of a future Earth which is semi-submerged due to the greenhouse effect. It contains suggestions to teachers for use, but does not offer tasks to learners. 510 Hours is a collection of stories from AMEP learners about how they used their 510 hours of language learning in the AMEP. Tasks for learners are provided. Read the Sign provides low level reading material. Further strands of content are planned.

The strand most relevant to the issue of sustainability is Realweb. Realweb was originally developed with funding from the then Office of Training and Further Education, now the Office of Post-compulsory Education, Training and Employment, in Victoria. The funding was part of an extensive strategy, TAFE Online 2001, which is encouraging TAFE providers in Victoria to explore the options in

online learning through the development of an online learning environment (the TAFE Virtual Campus), online content, professional development and research.

In Realweb teachers create learning tasks, aimed at specific curriculum outcomes, based on the "realia" found at other websites. A paper-based equivalent of this would be a teacher creating a worksheet to accompany a chapter from a textbook, or a brochure, or some other piece of realia. The teacher doesn't have to write the book or create the realia, just "frame" the realia for a particular curriculum goal. In Realweb the tasks are all based on websites that teachers have discovered, but not created themselves. For example, one teacher has created a series of tasks based on the Immigration Museum of Melbourne's site. Teachers are able to create tasks without having to learn html (hypertext markup language) though if they wish they can use html in their task creation.

From the outset, our goal was to work in a way that would be within the capabilities of any teacher, within the constraints of their existing work conditions. Much of the talk about teachers going online seems to involve teachers creating websites and learning html. We felt that that was rather like asking them to build the classroom and publish the text book before starting to teach. Clearly the online environment does make it easier to build a site and publish content, but it still isn't *easy*, something the enthusiasts often forget.

By distinguishing between *task* creation and *content* creation we were able to come up with a model that allowed teachers to add value online, just as they do in person and on paper, by intermediating between a

resource and a learner to shape the way the learner engages with the resource for an educational goal. In our view this is no different to what happens in a paper-based Independent Learning Centre.

Some people have felt that this approach is inconsistent with the freedom of the individual to surf the Internet and discover resources and engage with them in relatively unstructured ways. Such an arrangement may be appropriate where access and resources are unlimited. It may be appropriate in circumstances that lend themselves towards a project-based approach, which emphasises the social dimensions of language learning (Debski and Gruba 1999).

However, where teachers and learners have limited access to the Internet and curriculum goals have to be met within a certain timeframe, we believe a service that offers a range of activities focused on specific curriculum goals is a choice that teachers and learners should be allowed to have. By allowing many teachers each to focus on their own area of interest, we ensure that a wide range of topics is provided to learners, far beyond what any individual teacher could provide, and perhaps beyond what learners could find on their own. Note that we are not saying that learners shouldn't learn to search the internet; only that it shouldn't be the only option available.

Right from the start of the Realweb project one of our key concerns was sustainability. We were aware that a very small proportion of education projects that receive funding result in products that have a life after the project funding has finished. Websites in particular are often treated as products that are finished when the project is over, whereas they are in fact more like services which need to be maintained and continuously developed. The

sites that are successful often rely on the efforts of one enthusiastic individual, who may ultimately burn out: even the famous Dave of Dave's ESL Cafe seems to have reached this point - last year his site was for sale!

We were therefore as concerned with our business plan as well as our educational plan. We offered access to the tasks developed with the original funding free of charge for the first year after the project finished. At the same time we continued to develop new tasks, but these were made available to educational providers for a low subscription fee that offered unlimited access for a year for their teachers and learners. This was a very simple mechanism that made it easy for potential users to decide to take up the offer. In 1999 the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs sponsored access to Realweb by paying the annual fee of all Adult Migrant English Program providers. This sponsorship is continuing in 2000, and includes Easynews as well.

The subscription fees enable us to pay the staff members who manage the maintenance and development of new tasks for all the strands. Although we don't currently pay teachers directly for tasks in Realweb, we encourage their employers to support the process and to see task development as professional development in online learning. We offer our training services at cost to assist in this process. All those involved - task writers, the providers that support them, the organisations that sponsor access, and the organisations that provide development funds, are clearly acknowledged throughout the Virtual ILC.

To what extent has the Virtual ILC provided

a realistic opportunity for a wide range of teachers to work online? And to what extent has such task writing become part of teachers' everyday work?

Although we have over sixty task writers we are finding that not all teachers are continuing to create tasks, and some have dropped out of active task creation. Our informal checking among task creators in Victoria revealed a number of reasons.

Most teachers said they didn't have time. Expecting teachers to build online work into existing work structures seems optimistic. Teachers work within an extremely full, and uniquely (for professionals) constrained environment. Typically the addition of something new is not balanced by the removal of something old. Our hope that task creation for VILC would slip easily into individual teachers' work was unrealistic.

Access is still an issue. Although teachers have email accounts they may still share access and may not have computers on their desktops. If they have access at home it may be slow.

We have found that actually setting a time aside for group task creation has been quite successful, even when such sessions are run on weekends. We have added a professional development component to task creation, and providers may be encouraged to support attendance by recognising outcomes as part of professional development. By running sessions at venues with fast, supported access, the process of task creation is made simpler.

At a broader level is the issue of whether the development of Realweb tasks should be the work of generalist teachers or specialist teachers at all. Or to put it another way, should all teachers be expected to be able to create

tasks (or indeed to work online)? In the case of Easymedia one teacher is assigned to task creation and paid for the work. We are reluctant to apply such restrictions to Realweb, since we are keen to build a community of task writers, but we are having to consider more formal mechanisms to ensure quality and continued input.

We are looking at various ways to encourage task writers. These include identifying and supporting local Realweb representatives who can organise face to face task writing get-togethers. We are also considering making offering formal credentialling of task writing skills, along the lines of other certification programs, such as those offered by Microsoft and Novell (though with far more modest aims!). Finally, we are going to open up the task creation process so that task writers can write tasks for any topic.

But will these changes really make task writing and online work in general, sustainable? Perhaps it might help to be a little more specific about what *sustainable* might mean. The meaning I used above was along the lines of *to keep, or maintain*. But this is only one of six meanings in a dictionary I consulted, and it was actually the last in the list. Let's see if any of the other five preceding definitions in that dictionary give a clue as to the issues underlying sustainability.

The first definition is *To support, carry the weight of, hold up*. Every teacher probably feels that this is what they are doing for the whole of the education system anyway, let alone any new online initiatives! The second definition is *to undergo, endure, suffer*. Again some teachers may feel that

they are indeed suffering not just under the weight of this innovation, but of any number of other changes to the educational environment. The third is *to enable, give support to.* There are two issues here. This is perhaps what teachers have always seen themselves as doing for their students, yet in the online environment they are unsure of how they should be doing it, and what their role should be. At the same time, teachers may feel that their employers are not giving them the tools and the support they need. In the case of the TAFE Virtual Campus, there is an increasing focus on entry level training and continuing support for teachers. We are seeking to do this as well with VILC, by setting up local coordinators and strand leaders.

The fourth meaning is *to uphold, approve.* This is interesting because user attitude is important in the success of an innovation. Teachers may feel that they are implicitly acknowledging directions they may not be comfortable with, or even that they have to accept the whole globalisation "package" by going online. This is related to the fifth definition, *to confirm or corroborate*, which is also linked to one of the questions that teachers often bring up about going online, which is, how do we know it works? Where's the evidence that confirms or corroborates the claims being made about online learning?

In reality, however, we are not really going online because something has been proven educationally, any more than we use print on paper, or face to face teaching, because they are proven to have a certain effect. We teach face to face and on paper because these technologies are now part of our "natural" environment, the one we know and grew up with. As our wired environment becomes more ubiquitous it too will become natural, and we will routinely carry out online teaching and learning activities, which will involve engaging with resources, and communicating about and

around those engagements. Clearly, online opportunities are not equally part of the "natural" environment for all, but then neither are other social and economic resources. Individuals and groups will engage with disadvantage, whether digital or otherwise, in the ways they choose. However, engagement is what is critical. Disengagement may be a short term option, but it's not sustainable. The second part of the sixth definition was *to prolong, keep going*. That's what we need to ensure happens to enable teachers to continue to carry out the engagements with disadvantage that for many are central to their work.

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