

The Development of VILC

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In December 1996, AMES Victoria successfully tendered for funding to develop materials for English teaching online. The funding was made available through the State Office of Training and Further Education (OTFE) to develop online learning in Technical and Further Education (TAFE) providers throughout the state of Victoria, Australia. In addition to content development, OTFE was developing an online learning environment, the *TAFE Virtual Campus*, as well as supporting other developmental initiatives. The successful grant was the first time AMES Victoria had received funding to develop online materials.

The project was developed and managed by the AMES Computer Literacy Centre (CLiC), a small (two staff) unit that was established in 1996 to build on emerging opportunities in online learning. Although the focus of the unit was initially on training, staff saw both professional staff development and online resource creation as important growth areas. Accordingly, the unit proposed that teachers, not computer specialists, develop content for the project.

The online materials development project began at the start of 1997 when staff throughout AMES were invited to participate. Interested staff were not to be recruited out of existing groups of CALL specialist teachers, but rather from amongst those who were experienced, interested, and could tolerate the possibility that work would be relatively unstructured. At that point, such staff were needed because neither project goals and processes had been clearly defined.

Once suitable staff were recruited, they agreed to meet one day a week for the year. Initially they were charged with developing online resources from an existing set of distance learning course materials that were being used by the national Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) distance learning program. The goal of the project was to produce a collection of teaching materials to be delivered via the internet, preferably via the *TAFE Virtual Campus* site. The project was directed by the manager of the Computer Literacy Centre and supported by the training organiser. A total of seven teachers were involved in the initial year.

The online materials development project began with participants developing familiarity with the Internet. They also gained a stronger understanding of the distance learning materials that were to be the source of the content. Within the first few weeks however, it became apparent that the time taken to develop the materials would be greater than anticipated because of the complexity of the target materials. The original distance learning resources were thought to be too difficult for non-specialists to revise, particularly because the materials made extensive use of embedded audio and video files within a complex structure. It was also thought that such complex resources would put demands on the Internet access of potential users, many of whom had limited access at best. Simpler text-only materials, it was argued, were likely to be easier for teachers to produce and easier for students to access.

Since one of the goals of the project was to develop realistic and sustainable materials development processes for teachers throughout AMES, project staff reconsidered their

initial use of existing distance learning materials. Staff decided to focus their efforts on the essentials of what teachers do already and how that could work online. Based on the familiar communicative language teaching paradigm, staff argued that teachers would likely want to work with authentic realia to create activities in order to meet specified learning objectives. At that point project staff realised that whole of the Internet was made of authentic texts and messages. Essentially, the project then decided that it would aim to create a means for teachers to frame that realia under a curriculum goal so as to emulate what they already did in the classroom. The teachers themselves would not create content; they would create learning tasks based on existing content.

Once the concept of utilising authentic online content was adopted, project staff spent several weeks discussing and refining a task frame that would be applicable for the target curriculum, the Certificate of Spoken and Written English (CSWE). Staff then identified a topic or theme and began searching the Internet for suitable pages. The staff spent the remainder of the year writing tasks.

While tasks were being written, the project managers realised that the *TAFE Virtual Campus* would not be ready in time to serve as the delivery platform. Thus, a development brief for software production needed to develop a project-specific platform was sent out for tender. After much discussion, the successful tender was chosen on the basis that the project required a database with a web front end, an unusual strategy at that time. Significant effort, therefore, was directed to further database design. By the end of 1997, the database was completed. Project staff had also written over a hundred tasks and had interested other teachers to become involved in what was named, initially, the *Virtual CSWE*.

At the beginning of 1998, the project management sought internal AMES funding to further develop the online resource centre. To broaden its appeal, the site was renamed the *Virtual Independent Learning Centre* (VILC). The name makes reference to the many Independent Learning Centres that exist throughout AMES and in various forms in a number of other educational institutions. One typical feature of independent learning centres throughout the AMES is racks of plastic folders, each one containing a piece of realia and activities created by teachers. These are all organised according to curriculum levels. Each VILC task, therefore, was seen to be the virtual equivalent of one of these.

Development of the VILC was slowed in early 1998 with the temporary departure of key management personnel. One part-time staff member continued to assist and support task developers. In the latter part of the year the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs (DIMA) expressed interest in having AMEP providers make full use of VILC. A business plan was thus written to foster an ongoing revenue stream for VILC in order to further develop the site without reliance on internal funding. At the of 1998, a subscription-based fee structure was put into place.

At the beginning of 1999 DIMA agreed to meet the subscription fee for all AMEP providers in Australia. For its part, AMES agreed to continue to subsidise one staff member part-time. The AMEP sponsorship led to the immediate establishment of a large community of users, which was carefully supported and nurtured. The number of task writers rose, as teachers discovered how simple it was to get started. There was also the beginning of an expansion in the number of curriculums, with the setting up of an Industry collection of tasks managed by the AMES Victoria Workplace Communications Unit. By the end of 1999 the program was well-established.

In 2000 a new content stream was introduced based on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) radio news, as well as content that had been funded from several other sources. VILC was "subdivided" into three main services:

Realweb - a collection of hundreds of teacher-made learning tasks that are based on authentic websites and designed for the main ELT curriculums.

Easynews - containing hundreds of specially-prepared learning tasks based on SBS radio news.

Checkout - a collection of specially-prepared reading comprehension materials.