



## COVER SHEET

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## *More important than education: Using telecommunications to connect Indigenous students with their home community*

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We often hear claims of telecommunications being able to change our lives by bringing us closer together, of giving us a human as well as a technical connection to others and of creating dynamic communities of people online. In 2001, an innovative telecommunications project entitled *Reach In – Reach Out* was established to achieve this claim for a group of Indigenous students from the remote settlement of Lockhart River, forced to leave their home community to continue their education. The secondary school was closed in 1999 after a community decision to do so, and 2000, the first year of the alternate program (that is, with all post-primary students having to attend boarding schools in major towns and centres) was marked by high dropout rates and student truancy. There was widespread disquiet as disoriented and poorly prepared students, locally referred to as the “away-students” tried to cope with life outside of Lockhart River. *Reach In - Reach Out* emerged as a response to ameliorate the students’ sense of unhappiness and isolation. The project, through the embedded activities described in this paper, is seemingly meeting its goals and beginning to make a difference in the experience of schooling for some of the children of Lockhart River.

The information presented in this paper is drawn from two research studies of the *Reach In - Reach Out* project (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a, 2002b; Lloyd, 2003). The first of these, conducted in 2001-2002, was funded by the RITE (Research in Information Technology in Education) Group, QUT and was concerned with Lockhart River State School and the impact of the Project on the teachers and the curriculum practices of the school. The second and most recent study, conducted in 2002-2003, was funded by the QUT Faculty of Education and was concerned with the interactions between Lockhart River State School and the boarding schools and residential colleges attended by Lockhart River students. In each case, the sites studied were treated as activity systems and data was analysed using a Cultural Historical Activity Theory framework (Engestrom, 1987). Where relevant, source quotes from these studies are included in this paper and these will be annotated as being taken from either the “first” or “second” study. Pseudonyms are adopted in all cases in accordance with the permissions given to the studies by the interview subjects and their employing authorities. Further studies are planned which survey the perceptions of the students involved and the effects and affects on the families in Lockhart River. The data underlying this paper therefore comes from within the schooling system and from external observation. The next proposed step in this research is to balance these findings with community reactions and perceptions. What is reported here represents the initial steps taken by an urban non-Indigenous researcher into the schooling experiences of remote Indigenous students.

### **Background to the studies**

Lockhart River is an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community situated on Cape York Peninsula (13° S 149° E). It is the most northerly mainland settlement on the east coast of

Australia and is 780 kilometres (by road) north of Cairns. The Lockhart River area extends some 300 kilometres from north to south and inland to beyond the Great Dividing Ranges. It comprises six territories (traditional lands) which are the (i) the Wuthathi (Northern and Southern); (ii) the Kuuku Ya'u and Kanthanumpu (Southern Kuuku Ya'u), (iii) the Uutaalnganum; (iv) the Umpila; and (v) the Kaanju. The Lockhart River township, founded in 1924 as an Anglican mission, is situated on Kanthanumpu (Southern Kuuku Ya'u) land. The most common Aboriginal language spoken is Kuuku Ya'u (Lockhart River Land and Sea Management Agency, 2001). The school at Lockhart River is part of the Education Queensland (state) system, and it offers a P-7 curriculum organised into a pre-school and a four level primary school. The student population is relatively stable (usually around 150-160) with an estimated 10% of students moving between schools and communities (particularly Cairns, Weipa, Coen and Bamaga) during the year depending on family ties.

### **The *Reach In - Reach Out* Project**

At its simplest, the *Reach In - Reach Out* Project offers a set of community and classroom activities using information and communications technology (ICT). The Project began operations in 2001 and is directed by the Indigenous Education Training Alliance (IETA) in Cairns (which is, in turn directed by Education Queensland). The project was operationalised by Ms Michelle Williams, who, at time of writing, was its current Project Director, and it continues to be supported by Education Queensland, particularly through the Cairns and Cape District Office. It is an evolving project, and while its core aim has remained constant, there has been an expansion and changes to its daily operations and implementation. The project was initiated in Lockhart River with the knowledge, permission and support of the community.

The Cape York Justice Study referred to the Project as the “successful *Reach In - Reach Out* Project” and cited it as an exemplary model to follow because of its continuing efforts to “develop, trial and evaluate strategies to support primary students accessing secondary education outside of their home communities” (State of Queensland, 2001, p. 65). This paper will attempt to define why it has been described as exemplary and will begin to do so through an annotated description of its goals.

The four interdependent goals of *Reach In - Reach Out* are (i) “reaching in”; (ii) “reaching out”; (iii) curriculum integration; and, (iv) collegiality and support. The first two goals are conceptual while the latter two are operational. These interdependent goals may be expanded as follows:

#### **1 Reaching In**

This goal is concerned with the affordances for students who are away to reach [back] into Lockhart River. The Project Director (in personal interview) described this as being about:

... connecting kids who are at school back home with their families. And if you like, that's a signature activity in the Project. It's not necessarily the one we do most of the time but it's the one that people know the project by. It's the one that appeals to people. It certainly is the most important.

(Lloyd, 2003)

This conceptual goal describes the first part of the metaphor underlying the project's model of using the Internet as a communication device. The "away-students" reach in to (a) web pages prepared by the younger students at Lockhart River School; and (b) synchronous web-cam communication with their families (Family Connections).

## 2 Reaching Out

While this goal is the necessary obverse of "reaching in," it is also independently concerned with preparing the younger students for their future experiences of schooling away from the community. The Project Director (in personal interview) described this as being about:

... helping the next cohort of kids in communities have an understanding of what school will be like before they attend it. Through concrete experiences of their elder peers, brothers, sisters and using the connections with families as an excuse to teach kids about the "literacy of schooling" - and I use that concept "literacy of schooling" quite broadly to be more than just reading and writing but to be about communicating and understanding the concepts of schooling.

(Lloyd, 2003)

This conceptual goal represents the second part of the metaphor and reveals the underlying model to be concerned with two-way communication, with dialogue rather than broadcast. The community reaches out through (a) web pages prepared by the "away-students"; and (b) synchronous web-cam communication (Family Connections). These conceptual goals, that is "reaching in" and "reaching out" have the potential to change the relationship between the school system and the community, with the school taking an active role in facilitating the communication between the community and its "away-students."

## 3 Curriculum Integration

Making *Reach In – Reach Out* successful required profound changes in the daily practices of the Lockhart River school, particularly in regard to its use of information and communications technology (ICT) and its integration into the curriculum. The Project Director (in personal interview) described curriculum integration as being:

... about integrating all the activities of *Reach In- Reach Out* in the school's curriculum programs. ... So it's technology literacy and the "literacy of schooling" in amongst your other outcomes- based education, if that's what you're doing. Key Learning Area education, if that's what you're doing. Transition education, if that's what you're doing. Because unless this is a whole school thing it won't happen. It has to be part of a whole school program especially in upper primary years.

(Lloyd, 2003)

The achievement of this operational goal is therefore about whole-school reform and a rethinking of the role of ICT in the curriculum. Its enactment has ramifications well beyond the scope of this project and may serve to inform mainstream schooling.

## 4 Collegiality

An emergent operational goal of *Reach In – Reach Out* is the establishment and sustaining of collegiate networks within Lockhart River School and the secondary schools and residential colleges attended by the “away-students.” The telecommunications infrastructure has become a backbone of communication for teachers, carers and supervisors and this has served to create further scaffolding for the “away-students”, and, somewhat unexpectedly, for some of the younger and arguably poorly-prepared teachers in remote communities. The collegiality required to maintain the activities (described in the following section of this paper) is self-evident.

The four interdependent conceptual and operational goals of *Reach In - Reach Out* are enacted through communication using the Internet, between externally located Lockhart River students with their families and community and the integration of community and cultural projects and activities into the school curriculum. The enactment is through combinations of activities which are in a constant cycle of trial and development<sup>1</sup>. This paper will now focus upon four activities which were seen to be successfully meeting the goals of the project. These are (i) Family Connections, (ii) Lockhart Buddies, (iii) Media Galleries and (iv) E-mail Home. The annotated description of these projects allows an indirect examination of the effectiveness of the project.

### *Family Connections*

The *Family Connections* activity connects families in Lockhart River with children living at boarding schools or residential colleges. It therefore allows both “reaching in” and “reaching out.” Webcams and speakerphones are used in combination as these have been shown to provide the simplest, most economical and most robust form of connection. There is voice if the image fails, or there is an image if the audio link is lost. Webcams operate on a relatively low bandwidth, and while the visual quality is not high, the effect of the synchronous visual link is powerful.

One informant to the second study offered that ““kids are so homesick, they will do anything to be sent home – even to be expelled to be there” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 6). Similar observations were noted in the first study (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a) with the belief expressed that personal unhappiness and a sense of isolation were largely responsible for the students from Lockhart River not completing their secondary schooling. What was most interesting about the responses from both studies was that no teacher, carer or supervisor interviewed described the Project as being technocentric, a somewhat unexpected finding given the dependence of the project on its technologies and the initially relatively low levels of technological literacy held by these people. The informants to both studies defined the project as being about children, their connections with their family and community, and their educational opportunities. The technology was seen as an umbilical cord connecting the children to their homes. It subliminally accepted that the view that technology (ICT) had the power to defeat distance. One teacher from Lockhart River suggested that this support for the children was critical, their being away “without family ties ... is extremely important. Far more important than education. The social perspective is far more powerful than the education.” (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a). It is this quote which has given this paper its title and which encapsulates the social agenda of the *Reach In – Reach Out* Project. Determining how the community sees the project, that is, in human or technical terms, will be a key aim of further studies into the project.

In the first study (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a, 2002b), logistical problems at Lockhart River impeding the implementation of the *Family Connections* activity were noted. These generally involved misunderstandings about time and difficulties in transport or home management arrangements. Observations from the second study (2002-2003) would indicate that these problems have effectively been overcome through negotiations with the community. *Family Connections* is now operating successfully, that is, meeting its initial aims of synchronously connecting students with members of their families. Demonstrating the fluency and ease of the connections, a supervisor in a residential college (as informant to the second study) offered that:

They [the students] can get a message home, ... they can talk to someone from home - their parents or their brothers and sisters, cousins at the primary school ... they can talk at home and they can link up with the web-camera too. ... they're always... asking for it. They've got that support, so important when they're so far from home.

(Lloyd, 2003, p. 7)

An unexpected (but welcome) outcome of the *Family Connections* activity is the “classroom” connections which have been made possible by the technology. Through the day, students “connect” into remote classrooms (with prior arrangement by the teachers). This acts as an anchor for the students and provides a critical collegiate support link for the teachers. The *Family Connections* activity can be seen as an enactment of the first, second and fourth of the four interdependent goals of *Reach In - Reach Out* previously cited in this paper.

#### *Lockhart Buddies*

*Lockhart Buddies* are stuffed toys sent on exchanges with other schools. The toy becomes a “buddy” who then communicates back to the parent school. In the *Lockhart Buddies* activity, *buddies* were sent to Lockhart students living away from home in schools and residential colleges. The buddy was given the “mission” of investigating school, learning and life in places outside of the Lockhart River Community and relaying this information back to primary school students through a web page. The “away-students” have responsibility for the buddies and their participation enacts the second goal of the project.

The first study (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a) identified what it dubbed as “local adaptations” of the Lockhart Buddies activity from its origins in the *Travel Buddies* Project co-ordinated by the OzTeacherNet (under the direction of the RITE Group, QUT). These adaptations were summarised as (i) a whole-of-school approach; (ii) a commonality of purpose for the *buddies* to aid in the transition of students to living away at boarding school; (iii) an increased, and in some cases, sole use of web publishing as the means of communication between the “home” and “host” schools; (iv) the notion of travelling and non-travelling *buddies* with the *buddy* acting in both cases as an empathetic “other” which students identify with and treat as a peer; (v) an emphasis on literacy (including ESL approaches) and numeracy in related activities; and, (vi) the use of the *buddies* as a link to the Community. The second study (Lloyd, 2003) noted the motivational role of the “buddies” for students, particularly in the creation of authentic writing tasks and in gaining computer skills.

The *Lockhart Buddies* activity can be seen as an enactment of the second and third of the four interdependent goals of *Reach In - Reach Out* previously cited in this paper, in that it enables

students to publish news and information about their new school locations, and it provides an authentic curriculum task for teachers. The students reaching back into Lockhart with information about their high schools are helping to prepare younger ones to make this transition. One of the teachers at Lockhart River School (as informant to the first study) offered that the travel buddy is “someone they trust” who will tell them what high school “will be like – ... the food ..., the uniforms, and the security stuff” (Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a, p. 64).

One buddy, a now rather bedraggled but well loved teddy bear called Timmy, travels to all the schools attended by the Lockhart River students. The reporting of Timmy’s adventures enacts both the “reaching in” and “reaching out” goals.

### *Media Galleries*

A media gallery is a collection of digital photos presented in “thumbnail” form on web pages. They are stored in an online database having been entered by students and teachers involved in the *Reach In – Reach Out* Project. The database design allows the thumbnail images to be sorted, and displayed dynamically in response to simple search queries. Students can retrieve images based on places, events or categories such as animals, food, or school activities.

Students in participating schools originally developed media galleries for younger students at Lockhart River to learn about the world outside, particularly about those centres where students will attend boarding school. This activity is part of a broader attempt to prepare younger students for schooling outside of the Lockhart River Community. Lockhart River students and community members have developed media galleries for children away from home. As with the *Travel Buddies* project, these are often used as a stimulus for literacy activities in their new schools. These galleries are also used as a teaching tool within Lockhart River. A particular example of this being the “letter” gallery using local images to illustrate the letters of the alphabet (as described in Lloyd & Cronin, 2002a).

Consistent with the evolutionary nature of all the *Reach-In Reach-Out* activities, the structure of the media galleries<sup>2</sup> has changed since its inception. And, as consistent with other activities, its fundamental principles have not. The database is multi-user with the users geographically remote from each other. There is no editorial control over what is posted and the participating teachers may choose what they deem to be appropriate for their needs. Events such as Arts Festivals are recorded with the support and permission of the community.

The *Media Gallery* activity can be seen as an enactment of the first, second and third of the four interdependent goals of *Reach In - Reach Out* previously cited in this paper, in that it enables a reaching-in, a reaching-out and acts as a stimulus for curriculum activities.

### *E-mail Home*

The *E-mail Home* activity is a new addition to the *Reach-In Reach-Out* set of activities. It is, as its name implies, directed at establishing email connections between students and their communities. It has necessitated the need for training in the communities and for access to computer facilities to be provided for members of the Lockhart River community. Indigenous teacher aides have been included in training programs and assist in the supervision of school computing facilities. Formal timetables have been established for training and access (with the

previously noted community project at Kowanyama State School being an exemplar of this). This purposeful training is in accord with plans for the proposed Cape York Digital Network which will enable “better Internet capacity, teleconferencing, video conferencing and a range of services that come with better communication” (Pearson, 2002). The funding for this network is sourced from the federal *Networking the Nation* grant scheme which has also given financial support for improved infrastructure in the *Reach-In Reach-Out* Project (completed in June 2003).

An extension of the e-mail home activity has been the establishment of mailing lists on the RITE server. These lists allow students from the same Community to have a separate space for communication. This is important as siblings and cousins need not necessarily be enrolled at the one school. One informant to second study noted simply that, “it’s a turn-on for the kids to communicate with each other” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 10). The initial messages to the community lists have been generally expressive and personal but they cannot be said to conform to Standard Australian English conventions. The messages are written as the students frequently speak, in a Creole or Aboriginal English. Although too early to draw conclusions, this form of expression is interesting as the students see this space as a personal one, distanced from the more formal conventions or parolés of “school” English. It provides a space for students which allows and legitimates their existing literacy in Aboriginal English or their home language.

## **Conclusion**

It would be simplistic to suggest that the *Reach In - Reach Out* Project has all the answers to redress the problems faced by remote Indigenous students living away from home, and contending with the challenge of mainstream secondary education. But early indications are promising with heightened class attendance and lower dropout rates being experienced. But, as the Project Director offered “the problem [of Indigenous education] is bigger than this; there is no ... single causal factor in that conglomeration of things you do to ... keep kids ... [at school] and keep them engaged.” But a shared sentiment was evident that *Reach In – Reach Out* was attempting to redress or ameliorate some of the problems faced by Indigenous students away from home. This was evident in the statement from the Principal of Lockhart River State School that “I think that *Reach In – Reach Out* offers a very real strategy, one which we’ve used to increase retention at school and also to increase ... learning outcomes” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 24); and the observation (from one of the teachers in the second study) of the positive effect of *Reach In – Reach Out* on students because “it’s hands-on, it’s real life and it’s connecting back home which is just so, so important for these kids that are so far from home; linking up with their families” (Lloyd, 2003, p. 30). The perceptions of the families remain to be investigated through further study, and because of this, conclusions about the success of the project are perhaps premature.

The heart of this Project is its abiding care for the Indigenous students it is trying to help. It is a telecommunications project but is seen (and enacted) as being predominantly about people and the human connections between them. The real challenge for this Project is ensuring that its message is not lost as it is extended to include more schools and more communities. But, for those currently participating across Far North Queensland, there was a definite sense of a shared outcome and a genuine concern to help its students. *Reach In - Reach Out* embodies a pro-active strategy to test preconceptions about what telecommunications can do to create human spaces which here is a space for Indigenous students to be themselves, to affirm who they are and to

sustain their links to home and community while physically being a part of mainstream education. It is a test which, on present observations, it seems to be passing with flying colours.

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## Notes

- 1 See <http://www.schools.ash.org.au/reachinreachout> for a full and current list of the Project's current activities.
- 2 The media galleries are publicly available at (<http://www.asg.org.au/reachinreachout>).