

LOOKING BACK ON A FUTURE-FOCUSED INITIATIVE



When the New Zealand Educational Administration and Leadership Society (NZEALS) asked for presentations sharing stories of innovation in leadership and educational practice, the e-learning initiative among East Auckland schools was welcomed as part of their programme. Consultant Maggie Ogram helped to create an e-learning network (ELN) that is focused on digital pedagogy.

MEETING A NEED

During the final term of 2012, ex-principal and now education consultant Maggie Ogram found that she was having the same conversations over and over again with principals of the Howick and Pakuranga schools cluster. At that time, BYOD was a very new idea, and Maggie found that she was talking to teachers who weren't really sure how, why, and if they should be looking at bringing this emerging digital paradigm into their own schools. Teachers and principals were asking themselves:

- » What is the best way to introduce BYOD into school?
- » Is BYOD the best option?
- » How do we ensure that our teachers have the necessary PLD and skills to implement a programme that uses technologies more to support learning?
- » How do we ensure that parents understand the thinking about the increasing use of devices?
- » What are the implications for the school's technological infrastructure?

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It was becoming clear at that point, says Maggie, that there would be obvious value in creating a collaborative E-learning network for primary and secondary schools within the east Auckland cluster, which would offer an e-learning professional development programme for school leadership and classroom teachers to share their questions, experiences and learning.

Expressions of interest from around the area convinced Maggie that the time was right, and so in May 2013 a two-term, trial e-learning network (ELN) was created. Maggie, serving as network leader, acted as the programme coordinator along with Mark Osborne, senior consultant for CORE Education.

The trial comprised morning and after-school workshops – alternating every week – over the two terms. The first job was to identify where the focus of the trial should be. Maggie says the priorities of the ELN were arrived at through on-going conversation.

“It just came from talking to people really. I used the e-learning planning framework as a guide, and we set about working out where exactly schools were in relation to this guide. From that came the two foci of the trial, which were digital citizenship and pedagogy.

“I went in as network leader, for want of a better title. I visited every school twice over the two terms, and worked with them to come up with a strategic plan customised to each school. These actions and goals linked into the e-learning planning framework.”

Most of the ‘heavy lifting’ during the workshops – in terms of presentations and leading learning – was done by CORE Education personnel, although Maggie is a firm believer in collaborative learning, as evidenced by the ‘Sparkshop’ that was run at one gathering: eight teachers conducted their own learning sessions, so that teachers had options. Maggie says it’s all about using the strength within the group, which comes back to the concept of ako; a symbiotic relationship between teacher and learner.

SUBSTITUTION IS NO SUBSTITUTE

Maggie says that one of the reasons that the group decided to pursue a close focus on digital pedagogy came from her observation that when teachers and schools start out on their digital learning mission, they tend to use things like mobile devices simply as a substitute for traditional classroom practice.

“A significant learning point that came out of all this cluster work was the importance of getting the pedagogy right, that’s what needs to come first. A lot of schools and teachers may have realised, after thinking ‘we need to provide – or allow for – digital devices for all our students’, that they may have gotten it backwards. Schools felt some pressure, I think, in 2013 to introduce schoolwide device capability, then duly purchased the tablets or whatever, before realising they didn’t have the pedagogy in place.

“There’s the danger that schools start out with a substitution model. So instead of writing things on paper, we’re going to write on a device. Or instead of looking something up in a book, we’re going to do that on a device.

“As a cluster, we’ve tried to grow past that and realise the true potential of digital learning. This means that, for example, the potential for collaboration has increased, with more teachers realising the possibilities involved in things like cloud storage, Google docs, and Dropbox. People are using these things now with students, so that students and teachers can work together, which ties in again I think with the concept of ako; an exchange between learner and teacher.

“It’s really about identifying ways of working and learning that are made possible by digital technology that weren’t possible without the technology.”

THE ELN IN 2014: FUTURE-FOCUSED EDUCATION

With a successful trial behind them the East Auckland ELN is now reflecting the pace of change in the arena of e-learning, and the programme in 2014 has a much broader brush. As more and more schools sign up for the N4L platform, and utilise high-speed UFB connectivity, infrastructure that previously may have hobbled a schools ability to get the most out of e-learning is rapidly becoming a non-issue. Based on schools’ strategic needs, as detailed by professional development requests, along with up-to-the-moment pedagogical development, the key foci at the centre of the East Auckland ELN professional development programme are now:


- » Teaching as inquiry
- » Student personalised, inquiry-based learning
- » Modern learning environments
- » Collaboration
- » Technologies to support learning.

SUSTAINING SUCCESS

The setting of specific goals and monitoring of progress remain within each schools strategic e-learning plan as an essential guide to the content of the ELN’s work. Self-assessment against the revised e-learning planning framework (January 2014) informs the programme content through the year.


Senior leadership teams from each of the schools meet twice per term for breakfast workshops, and all teachers across the seventeen schools in the ELN come together twice each term for afternoon presentations and workshops. This means that up to 300 teachers may attend, offering a considerable opportunity for networking. All of the teachers in the ELN schools have access to a secure website that provides resources and information relating to the programme; this means that all content covered by workshops and presentations is archived and available any time; a demonstration that the ELN is working in terms of getting teachers thinking about the opportunities that digital technologies can afford, both to their own practice, and to their students’ learning.

As 2014 progresses schools and individual teachers within the ELN across and within schools are becoming increasingly proactive in using technologies to collaborate in learning and teaching. Opportunities to grow the professional capacity within the group continue through occasional ‘un-conferences’ led by teachers within the ELN: conferences where people participate in a meaningful and interactive way, rather than just absorbing a lecture. Maggie also helps to facilitate visits by ELN teachers to schools that have been identified as great digital practitioners. *



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