Communities@work – engaging Gen Y in community work studies through blended distributed delivery

Kerry Russo

New technologies are continuously being examined by educators, researchers, and communities in an on-going effort to enhance professional development, encourage lifelong learning, provide education opportunities to traditionally underserved populations, and conserve limited resources ... All our students must have equal opportunities to find the resources and the knowledge of the world those resources offer (Schrum & Berenfeld, 1997, p. 159).

Introduction

In the rush to adopt the new learning technologies, have educators become too focused on how to use the technology instead of why? The new technologies open many avenues for educational delivery. Addressing the potential for technologies to transform education, Schrum and Berenfeld (1997) assert the need to continuously examine how new technologies may create equal learning opportunities. Whilst technology enables educators to globalise their classrooms, Lorimer (1996) suggests that technology has not ‘influenced the art of teaching’; in fact, the ‘instructional process remains largely the same’ (p. 113). In their analysis of constructivist and learning technologies Jonassen, Peck and Wilson (1999) assert ‘the internet is not a blackboard’, that constructivist and cooperative learning are characteristic of this medium as opposed to instructivism (p. 48). The relationship of technology and constructivist learning central to the discus-
sion of the research presented in this paper emphasises the importance of pedagogical frameworks. Technology based pedagogy was the focal point of the program. Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000) maintain that educators fundamentally need to keep ‘educational purposes and standards clearly in focus’ (p. xiii), but call for educators to ‘know how to create learning activities that will connect in meaningful and motivating ways’ (p. 153), thereby situating technology use within a pedagogical framework.

This paper, presented as a practitioners’ guide, examines issues for consideration in the development of a Blended Distributed Delivery (BDD) program and addresses the challenges of working with ‘Gen Y’ learners. ‘Gen Y-ers’ are the generation of young people born between 1980 and the mid-1990s who have grown up with the new technologies and are very connected and ‘wired’ (McCrindle, 2006). The study centres on the delivery of Certificate II in Community Services Work by a team of community workers/teachers with the Barrier Reef Institute of Technical and Further Education (BRIT) in rural North Queensland.

Certificate II in Community Services Work is a pathway qualification that introduces students to a variety of community work fields. These fields include community development, youth work, drug and alcohol counseling, disability work, child care and community education. The program is delivered part-time over two years in conjunction with the student’s senior schooling. The aim of the research is to examine the pedagogical parameters of a BDD model and propose practice-based issues for consideration. The case study considers the significance of a set of rules referred to as pedagogical parameters in the delivery of a BDD program. These pedagogical parameters have been established through practice-centred inquiry and are not intended to be arbitrary or rigid, but rather the basis of a fluid contribution to discussion on the development of a technology based pedagogical paradigm.

**Pedagogical Parameters of Blended Distributed Delivery**

The Barrier Reef Institute of TAFE defines BBD as learning models that are based on pedagogy that centres on the needs of the learner and combine a variety of teaching and learning strategies that are aimed at
maximising education and training outcomes for each individual learner. These blended learning models cross boundaries of distance and time by integrating information and communications technology into teaching and learning.

The term BDD refers to the combination of teaching and learning strategies within a pedagogical framework to engage learners. Reeves (1999) suggests that many educators ‘assume that the WWW (world wide web) is a magic box, and that simply putting content on the Web guarantees better learning’ (p. 3). However, this assumption may amount to ‘eReading’ not ‘eLearning’. BDD is founded on pedagogy and instructional design that is learner focused and innovative; the more effective the level of instructional design the more likely eLearning will be achieved. Reeves (1999) asserts ‘the WWW does not guarantee learning any more than the presence of a library in a school guarantees learning. The Web is simply a resource which must be designed to support effective instructional dimensions’ (p. 3). Jonassen et al. (1999) maintain that instructional delivery is the wrong issue. ‘When learners are passive receptacles of technology-delivered messages to be consumed and regurgitated, they are not learning meaningfully. When students learn by using technologies as tools for growing and sharing … they are learning meaningfully’ (p. 218).

BDD is more than the use of the new learning technologies; it is an educational process that is suggestive of a new pedagogical practice. Reeves and Reeves (1997) address the uniqueness of web based instruction (WBI) and assert it is more than a ‘mix of media features’; it is ‘the pedagogical dimensions that WBI can be designed to deliver’ (p. 59). BDD enables the distribution of learning thereby creating access and equity. Learners within a BDD program can access quality educational opportunities that are steeped in collaborative, active and reflective learning strategies that create meaningful learning activities.

Table 1 illustrates the BDD set of tools available for educational delivery within the Institute. This table is not intended as a static document. It is a representation of the ever-changing new learning technologies and teaching and learning strategies potentially in use within BDD.
Table 1. BDD Set of Tools used by BRIT.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Synchronistic</th>
<th>Asynchronistic</th>
<th>Teaching and learning strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refers to same time interactions.</td>
<td>Refers to interactions not occurring at the same time, enabling flexibility</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Face-to-face classes</td>
<td>• Video streams</td>
<td>• Project based assessments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Tutorials</td>
<td>• Websites</td>
<td>• Industry placement</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Video conferencing</td>
<td>• Blogs (online journals)</td>
<td>• Practical and block training</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Online conferencing or webinars (lectures or workshops delivered online).</td>
<td>• Wikis (websites that enable participants to edit and create content)</td>
<td>• Learning support in BDD is contextualised through integrated literacy support.</td>
</tr>
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</table>

The educator blends the tools most appropriate to meeting the learner’s needs. It is these blends that become the foundation of the BDD program’s instructional design, including synchronistic tools, asynchronistic tools and teaching and learning strategies as represented in Figure 1.

Further examination of these tools and their utilisation in the Certificate II in Community Services Work program will be discussed later in the paper. However, before choosing a blend, educators need to consider the pedagogical parameters of a BDD program.
Figure 1. BDD Set of tools
In the development of BDD programs certain pedagogical parameters must be maintained. Thus, Hung and Wong (2000) propose a framework that situates learning as a ‘transitional process between subject, object and community’ (p. 33). Both Jonassen et al. (1999) and Hung and Wong (2000) stress the need for students to be engaged in ‘meaningful learning opportunities’ whereby they are actively processing information collaboratively, so that problem solving is a co-operative effort. The active learning approaches to project-based assessments ‘give students an opportunity to do, rather than just hear about the subject of study’ (Jonassen et al., 1999, p. 27).

Figure 2. Pedagogical parameters of blended distributed delivery
The Certificate II teaching team suggest certain tools and considerations be retained when developing a BDD program. These pedagogical parameters of BDD promote learning opportunities and engage learners in meaningful and collaborative learning as illustrated in Figure 2.

The pedagogical parameters of BDD are influenced by reflective practice and grounded in ‘personal interpretive framework’ (Levy, 2004, p. 50). Through observation, practice, reflection and examination of literature, pedagogical influences were identified for improved delivery of a BDD program. Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson & McConnell (2004) emphasise that ‘The centrality of human interaction, in our conception of networked learning, carries with it some pedagogical commitments and beliefs about learning. In short, there is no point to networked learning if you do not value learning through co-operation, collaboration, dialogue, and/or participation in a community’ (p. 2). A variety of influences on the pedagogical parameters of BDD are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. Influences of pedagogical parameters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pedagogical parameters of BDD</th>
<th>Influenced by</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational purpose not economic rationalism</td>
<td>Students are not interested in learning via the new technologies if it is simply a repackaging of the learning material online. Lankshear, Snyder and Green (2000), refers to this as ‘old wine in new bottles’ (p. 22). BDD requires professional and economic commitments, but commitments wherein the focus remains on educational processes. BDD should not be used for economic rationalism.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology is a tool not ‘the’ tool</td>
<td>Technology must not to be used primarily because it is available. It must have an educational purpose and meet the student’s needs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pedagogical parameters of BDD</td>
<td>Influenced by</td>
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<tr>
<td>The internet is not a blackboard</td>
<td>The blackboard concept suggests students will learn from technology. Jonasen (2000) maintains ‘students do not learn from technology, rather, students learn from thinking in meaningful ways’ (p. 24).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology based pedagogy</td>
<td>Technology has to be participative, meaningful, accessible, inclusive, relevant and easy to engage within a paradigm that is people focused.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supportive learning environment</td>
<td>Inglis, Ling and Joosten (1999), in their concept of best practice for quality delivery with the new learning technologies, reinforce a supportive delivery with the emphasis on care, support and quality relationships. Teacher/tutor contact and support create supportive learning environments.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ease of access</td>
<td>Access relates to overcoming the barriers of BDD and includes technology deficiencies, culture and literacy. Technology allows for greater equity, access and flexibility. However it is to no avail if the student cannot access the technology.</td>
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<tr>
<td>The participants</td>
<td>‘The bottom line is that the technology should not drive the course. Instead, the desired outcomes and needs of the participants should be the deciding factors’ (Palloff &amp; Pratt, 1999, p. 63).</td>
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<tr>
<td>Learning communities</td>
<td>Learning communities or communities of practice enable participants to engage with the learning within a socio-cultural perspective.</td>
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Methodology

The methodology utilised in this study was practice-centered inquiry based on action research. It draws on the vast scope of practice-centred inquiry enabling insights into the subjective nature of educational practice as espoused by Anderson, Herr and Nihlen (1994) and Burns (2000). The study required examination of the practitioner’s educational practice and responses to that practice and encapsulates an insider’s view of the field (Burns, 2000). According to Grundy (1995), the aim of action research is to understand practices and improve them through involvement in cycles of research based change. The study sought to improve understanding of both the practice of BDD and the engagement of Gen Y-ers. Action research was chosen as the methodology to advance professional practice in BDD. The study does not seek to replace other approaches with a rigid set of rules and practices, but rather to engage practitioners in a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of BDD in the engagement of Gen Y students. As stated in the introduction, the pedagogical parameters of BDD are seen as a fluid contribution to discussion and reflective of Grundy’s (1995) assertion that action research is cyclical and on-going for continuous improvement in both teaching and learning.

Data collection

Observation and reflection: Through the critical observation of student responses to their educational practice and feedback from students and tutors, the practitioner-researcher was able to capture behavioural responses, interactions, reactions and significant activities. Just as Grundy (1995) addressed the need for reflective practice to be ‘a dispassionate view of what went on in order to make a rational and supportable assessment of the worthwhileness of what occurred’ (p. 10), in this instance, it is acknowledged that while the subjectivity of the study reflects practitioner values, a critical reflective approach is maintained. Through an awareness of these values the practitioner-researcher is able to maintain objectivity following processes of logical reflective non-judgemental (respecting others’ perspectives) practice.

Formal and informal discussions and evaluations: The collaborative approach to action research included the practitioner-researcher meeting regularly with team members on video conference or face to face to discuss issues as they arose in course implementation, conducting student evaluations
and encouraging team members and students to participate in the development of the program through informal questioning. Team members and students were asked to express their thoughts openly and honestly throughout the study to identify the strengths and deficits of the program. This information was then gathered and discussed at team meetings. Inclusion of the observations of the students and the team ensured the authenticity of the study.

Information gathering: Further information was gathered from the technology helpdesks and IT teams at the schools and within the TAFE sector. Through observation, recording and reflecting on the Helpdesk’s and IT team’s interaction and informal feedback, the practitioner sought to identify the integration and constraints of the new technologies within the program.

Data analysis
Data collected represented the presence of multiple realities and socially constructed meanings as is often evident in qualitative research. The data was thematically analysed and interpreted within three contexts:

(a) the use and significance of technology to the program
(b) the constraints and facilitators of teaching and learning with BDD
(c) the engagement of Gen Y students.

These contexts were chosen as they reflect key themes in the literature on technology in education and BDD. Within each context, a number of issues were identified in staff reflections and student feedback. The key issues reported are those that had significant impact on course implementation according to staff and students. The findings reported from the data analysis are indicative of the ongoing reflective processes of action research. Reflections on practice were compared with the current approaches in the literature on the use of the new technologies and where they fit within the pedagogical paradigms of eLearning and specific requirements for the engagement of Gen Y students.

Research context and participants
The study considered the issue of how to engage Gen Y students through BDD. The students were situated over a large area of North Queensland and many challenges had to be overcome before the learning could begin. Working within the BDD pedagogical parameters identified in Figure 2.
the team has for the past three years been delivering Certificate II in Community Services Work to secondary school students and young people disengaged from school. Under the new Queensland government policy ‘Education and Training Reforms for the Future’ (ETRF) stipulates ‘that all young Queenslanders are now required to be either learning or earning until they turn 17 years or complete a qualification’ (Education Qld, 2007). Consequently, many disengaged or at risk students are entering the TAFE sector. In the first year, the team worked collaboratively with Tropical North Queensland Institute of TAFE before striking out on its own. The delivery team now comprises one teacher and three tutors. They are all experienced community workers who openly share their knowledge, experience and skills with learners through modelling behaviour, attitude and aptitude appropriate to learning and working in communities.

Students currently enrolled in the program are from the four North Queensland communities of Ingham, Townsville, Charters Towers and the Whitsundays which encompasses an area of 36,000 square kilometers. The student population comprises young people who are in the vocational stream at school, or who have left school and are seventeen years old or less.

The engagement of students in community work studies presented a number of challenges:

- Students were situated in geographically diverse areas
- Several students were from remote indigenous communities
- Several students were disengaged or at risk of disengaging from school
- Some students experienced mental health and child protection issues
- Several students had a history of poor academic performance
- Few expectations had been placed on the students
- Some only chose community work because the other option was chemistry
- The team were vocational educators who had never taught school aged students
- To educate or ‘edutain’. Edutainment is the engagement of students through the use of the new technologies and is removed from the traditional education approach of instructionalism.
Engaging Gen Y learners

Development of quality educational programs focuses on the learner (Oliver, 2000). The learner in this case is a ‘Gen Y-er’. Generation Y is renowned for being wired, global and consumer and technologically savvy. Huntley (2006) maintains in study after study that Generation Y is described ‘as optimistic, idealistic, empowered, ambitious, confident, committed and, passionate’ (p. 14). This generation is the product of the Baby Boomers who instilled the assertion of rights as a key value. However, the student population in our program is clearly disadvantaged in a number of ways ranging from geographical location to socio-economic background and family dysfunction. Many students commented on feelings of isolation and disempowerment. For the Certificate II team, the concern was that the students would tune out. Therefore, the challenge was to not only create a program that would engage learners, but one that would maintain their attention, possibly requiring elements of ‘edutainment’.

To educate or ‘edutain’ is a concern for many educators and one that faced the delivery team. How was the team to develop a program that would engage the student in the learning and have the educational outcomes required of the course? Consideration was given to the social and cultural context of learning with particular attention paid to socially and culturally constructed instructional design. Henderson (1996) asserts instructional designers ‘influence and are influenced by particular world views; their class, gender, culture, values, and ideologies; selected learning theories; and particular instructional design paradigms’ (p. 85). These considerations informed the incorporation of the following learning principles into the program’s BDD.

- A variety of technology tools could be utilised to engage the learner
- The learner was used to constant stimulation
- The learner was immersed in the new technologies
- Edutainment would hold the learner’s attention
- Constructivist focused pedagogy.

These learning principles in turn influenced the instructional design for the community work program encapsulating the pedagogical parameters of BDD, shown in Table 3, Community Work BDD Set of Tools.
Table 3. Community work BDD set of tools

| Synchronistic          | • Face-to-face classes  
|                        | • Tutorials             
|                        | • Video conferencing    
|                        | • Online conferencing   |
| Asynchronistic         | • Video streams         
|                        | • Websites              
|                        | • Blogs (online journals)
|                        | • Web-based activities  
|                        | • Email                 
|                        | • Phone and SMS         
|                        | • Workbooks             
|                        | • Toolboxes             |
| Teaching and learning strategies | • Project based assessments
|                                | • Industry placement    
|                                | • Learning support      |

The blend used in the community work program demonstrates a commitment to being learner focused in the engagement of secondary school students, especially those at risk of disengaging, or who have disengaged from the school system. As stated in the influences of pedagogical parameters, the primary deciding factors were the participant’s needs, not the availability of technology. Established around the principles of constructivism, active learning, learning collaboration and teaching partnerships, the program continues to evolve to meet the learners’ needs.

The team’s strong pedagogical base arose from the successful delivery of a separate community services training program to mature aged students. This knowledge situated their pedagogical parameters and experience in the use of the new technologies and enabled the team to focus on the needs of Gen Y. The identification of these needs influenced the choice of blends. One of the tutors commented that ‘we are flexible enough to enable the student time out to sort through any personal problems before having them refocus on the learning’. This holistic approach to learning reinforces the pedagogical parameter of supportive learning environment.
Findings
This section begins with a discussion of how the identified challenges (above) associated with pedagogical parameters were encountered and addressed during the implementation of the course. These challenges are important to developing appropriate BDD in light of the needs of learners, aims for teaching and learning and practical issues of incorporating technologies and specific pedagogies. Here the findings are drawn together as a set of issues for consideration in the development of BDD. The following sections analyse key aspects of the data around the theme of engaging Gen Y students. Reflection on the behavioural issues identified by the teaching team, informed by students’ perspectives, suggested the significance of belonging and collaborative learning to engagement in learning and positive outcomes for students. These in turn led to new understandings of significance for BDD and technology based pedagogies.

The learner
The aim was to create a shared space that would nurture, stimulate and motivate. In particular the team sought to establish a sense of belonging to reconnect some of the students with social bonds. Xin Ma (2003) asserts ‘students’ sense of belonging to school is a critical research topic in education’ (p. 341). The promotion of supportive relationships and collaborative achievements were part of a caring ethos that contributed to the reconnection of students’ social bonds. This was achieved through the development of collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities such as participation in community meetings and events outlined later in the paper. The more the students felt they were heard, the more connected they felt to the community. Students often commented that they couldn’t believe other people were interested in their opinions.

Access
Access, in various forms, was another challenge. In rural North Queensland, access to broadband was an issue. Without broadband, the learners could not access the video streams or online conferences. Furthermore, some of the learners were from disadvantaged socio-economic groups and did not have access to a computer, let alone broadband. In order to overcome these difficulties, the team worked with the schools, local libraries and community agencies to provide computer access to students.
In order to ensure literacy was not a barrier for students wanting to access the program, an integrated literacy support service was available for students requiring extra learning support. The service is delivered within a strength-based model of integrated literacy and works with the student in the context of the learning.

The importance of interagency and interdepartmental collaboration is integral to facilitate and support BDD learning. One of the key differences between a face to face class and BDD is the interaction and involvement of other departments and outside agencies. A BDD program requires the coordination of key stakeholders to support learning, technology and access.

**Online requirements**

Once the issues of access were resolved, another obstacle arose that was to prove far too difficult to overcome. Firewalls, protective structures that establish internet security, excluded a significant learning tool from the program. ‘Centra’, an online conferencing platform had to be dropped from the program. Centra enables video and voice over internet, PowerPoint presentations, web searches, text, file sharing and whiteboard. Centra was one of the program’s blends. It was to be used as a synchronised tutorial for students geographically dispersed. The issue arose when dealing with eight different high schools, two different school systems, Education Queensland and Catholic Education, and six different TAFE campuses. Trying to synchronise and configure firewalls in what were effectively 16 different systems was an insurmountable task. Technological issues became the focus of the program and a conscious decision was made to refocus on pedagogy. The pedagogical parameters of BDD include ease of access as an important component of the program. The frustrations associated with technology access issues cannot be underestimated. Many students left the program during this time. Student evaluations noted their disappointment with the use of technology and conveyed their perception that if the technology did not work, then the program was deficient.

This illustrates two important points. Firstly, the significance of maintaining the focus on pedagogy and perceiving technology as the only tool. The mistake was that the team became caught up with trying to have online conferencing operating and overlooked the pedagogical dimensions of the program. Furthermore, the pedagogical parameter of technology as
a tool, not the tool, was ignored. The team needed to reinforce the collection of teaching and learning strategies that make up BDD. Secondly, the team needed to educate and prepare schools and students for the use of a technology platform. Before the program commenced, the team should have established processes for dealing with technological issues and networked with the schools, help desks and IT teams. Further orientation of the students in the use of the technology was also required.

Interaction

In a discussion on constructivism and learning technologies, Jonassen and colleagues (1999) address knowledge construction using technologies as ‘engagers and facilitators of thinking’ (p. 13). The focus of the discussion is that learning is reliant on a social context which enables the construction of knowledge through support, learning-by-doing, conversing, collaborating and reflecting (Jonassen et al., 1999). The blend chosen to enable an active construction and sharing of knowledge was video conferencing. A weekly one-and-a-half hour video conference enabled connection with students in all towns and provided a nurturing and stimulating shared space with opportunities to engage with each other and the learning as ‘active processes’ (Rogers, 2002). Each video conference is approached as a production with different camera angles, student involvement, no more than a ten minute talking head and PPP presentations. The teaching team worked collaboratively in partnerships. For example, at the end of the teacher’s PPP presentation, student feedback was sought from each town. Tutors engaged with the teaching partnerships by presenting their view or stance on the issue under discussion. The resultant effect was one of a large learning community engaging and participating in the learning.

The focus of the video conference is on facilitated discussion, and its constructivist approach ensures that the teacher is not seen as the font of all knowledge, but rather, the conduit of group knowledge, thought and opinion (Rowe, 1993). It follows Rowe’s (1993) description of the role of a teacher as ‘a facilitator and co-learner’ (p. 111). The group includes the teacher, tutors and learners who facilitate joint discussions by drawing on each other’s knowledge and experience during the video conference. The tutors facilitate discussion with their local group, then feed back this information to all the groups involved in the video conference. The vid-
eo conference also enables students to build social connections. In each
town, students brainstorm local site discussions on the whiteboard and
write personal notes to others in different towns. Furthermore, students
give local feedback to the main group during the video conference.

In addition, our Communities@work website and blog enables interac-
tion, connectivity and reflective learning. In discussing a writing process
approach incorporating collaboration and feedback for creating and com-
municating meaning, Grabe and Grabe (2001) promote web-based activi-
ties to enable students to collaboratively reflect on their learning. They are
further supported by Godwin-Jones (2003) who refers to the blog as a
self-publishing tool that ‘encourages ownership and responsibility on the
part of students, who may be more thoughtful (in content and structure)
if they know they are writing for a real audience’ (p. 12). In the course, the
blog adds value to the learning process as students work collaboratively
and submit their group project based assessments online for other groups
in different towns for review and comment. The blog in this instance is
not used as an online journal, but rather as a forum for students to engage
and comment on various web-based activities.

The website enables access to video streams on a variety of topics and
toolboxes from the Australian Flexible Learning Framework. Toolboxes
are computer generated learning objects that enable students to construct
their knowledge by engaging in a simulated environment. In the Orienta-
tion to Drug and Alcohol Work toolbox, students listened to a podcast on
an alcoholic’s family dysfunction and then placed their reflections on the
blog. Student evaluations demonstrate the student’s thoughts. Opinions
and dialogue are valued and contribute to discussion and class knowledge.
Elisha, one of the students, commented that ‘everyone was able to talk
and contribute, anything said was welcomed and heard.’ Another student,
Megan said, ‘The class was like a friendship. We had conversations. It was
not a normal teacher/student class.’ The students’ point of view situates
all learning within the program and the scope for their perspectives to be
incorporated into BDD design is paramount to its success.

The preceding discussion is summarised in Figure 3, a diagrammatic presenta-
tion of the issues for consideration in the development of a BDD program.
The study’s findings indicate that the practitioner needs to consider the
learner, their level of access, the coordination of key stakeholders, and both the online requirements and level of interaction necessary within the program. Consideration of these issues within the context of the pedagogical parameters of a BDD program is supported by the emphasis (Goodyear et al., 2004) on the centrality of human interactions in the new technologies, and the notion (Jonassen et al., 1999) that cooperative learning is distinctive of this medium. The continuous loop that characterises the interrelationship between learners, teachers and technologies cannot be underestimated. The experience of the Certificate II program demonstrates that learners need to connect with each other, the teacher, and the technology in order to engage and achieve. When the learners could

Figure 3. Issues for consideration in the development of a BDD program
not use the online conferencing tool they described a disconnection and conveyed their dissatisfaction with the program. Palloff and Pratt’s (1999) assertion that learners’ needs and aspirations should remain the deciding factors of any BDD program is consistent with the study’s findings. The students needed to interact with others in the program and to develop a connectiveness. The findings further illustrate collaboration as the key to developing a sense of belonging. Students’ comments indicated the value placed on working with others and building communities of inquiry through the use of the new technologies. All of these considerations constitute the complexities involved in the development of a BDD program and are illustrated in Figure 4.

BDD is not just a way of delivering a program over a large geographical area. In order for a BDD program to be successful and achieve student goals, it requires a strong pedagogical foundation and must maintain the human connection through interaction and the provision of support. The addition of this humanistic approach to learning ensures that the students are not trapped in what may otherwise be an impersonal technological vacuum. The findings demonstrate how the appropriate use of the new technologies and pedagogy as illustrated in Figure 4 enable students to engage with the learning.

**Behavioural issues**

This is not to say all is well within the program. The delivery team encounters problems on a weekly basis from students’ lack of attendance, motivation and focus. The team has noted that a number of students within the class have no demonstrated social bonds or connections to institutions. This could be indicative of the family problems acknowledged by students and their lack of participation within the community. The connection and reconnection of young people with social institutions may be achieved through establishing a sense of belonging. Whilst families generally provide social bonds, societal changes have led to many young people having no connection to any institution. Brendtro and Long (1995) suggest that ‘Today, having lost our tribes, we rely on a tiny nuclear family of one or two overstressed parents. Schools are now being asked to become the new tribes, but seldom are prepared to play this role’ (p. 102).

Students’ needs for belonging were illustrated during the cultural studies
Figure 4. Development of a BDD program
component of the course. Elaine, an Indigenous student with strong family support, spoke about Indigenous kinship ties. Elaine explained that she calls three people ‘Dad’; her Grandfather and her two Uncles. Furthermore, Elaine explained that in her culture, the lines are very blurred about family and that a cousin four times removed is a cousin and part of her immediate family. The envy in the classroom was palpable with many students commenting they ‘wished we were indigenous and part of a large mob like Elaine’. Elaine’s strong sense of belonging reverberated in the class reinforcing the teaching team’s observation that some students lacked connection to social institutions and that this connection was important to the students. Thus, a lack of belonging contributed to some of the disengagement issues demonstrated in class. For example, some of the students were very under-motivated and did not have any expectations placed on them from home or school. They were not working to their potential; university was seen as a strange and foreign prospect. One of the tutors commented that ‘the challenge in the engagement of the learner was the lack of expectations placed on the students for most of their lives. Leaving school half way through Year 11 to work in a small remote hotel was seen as a real option for one of these students’.

Within this context, the team met to develop the program’s behaviour management strategy. Underpinning the strategy is the need to provide a community that situates students in a non-judgmental and supportive environment. Garbarino (cited in Brendtro & Long, 1995) maintains that ‘school needs to be a refuge where their lives can be put back in balance’ (p. 103). Easier said than done, for though Huntley (2006) asserts, ‘members of Generation Y are intensely tribal creatures’ (p. 25), the class comprises students from four different towns and diverse groups of school students and unemployed young people. It was imperative for the team to find and maintain a common link between the students. Some shared identity could only be achieved by engaging the students in a supportive learning environment. The team sought to develop a caring approach through the promotion of collaborative and cooperative learning activities. Tutors often reminded students to be supportive and not judgmental of each other. An often used phrase was ‘step into the other person’s frame of reference’. The team discussed with the students the importance of not judging others or buying into stereotypes and continually modeled
a caring, nonjudgmental approach. This approach was essential to the establishment of a sense of belonging to the group and created an environment to achieve. The tutors and teachers knew students’ circumstances and supported any students having difficulties at home or school to work through their problems, by giving them time out, listening, and referring them to appropriate agencies, as promoted by Cassidy and Bates (2005) and Xin Ma (2003).

As community workers, the delivery team has brought the values and beliefs of their profession to the program. Just as the team do not put themselves forward as the font of all knowledge, the team also does not play an authoritarian role. Students are able to use their mobile phones and MP3 players during class time. The only rule enforced is one of respect. The team connected with the students through the provision of a non-judgmental shared space based on mutual respect and learning collaboration. The team encouraged and supported the students in their learning by scaffolding the learning to promote success. Finally, the team provided opportunities to the students by valuing their participation in the video conference and their engagement in project based assessments that contributed to the community. The continued participation of some students who left school and began working within the community illustrates the positive impact of the sense of belonging and shared purpose that developed within the program (Albert, 1991).

**Learning collaboration**

Reeves and Reeves (1997) maintain learners benefit both educationally and socially ‘when web based instruction is structured to foster cooperative learning’ (p. 63). Group project-based assessments sustain learning collaboration. The appeal of project based team assessments involved the students in active learning communities and introduced them to community services. Oliver (2000) addresses the need to ‘help the learner integrate new ideas with his or her own familiar model’ within a constructivist approach by grounding ‘activities in everyday contexts such as realistic cases, expressing topics to be learned in multiple perspectives, and encouraging student collaboration whereby divergent peer views are reconciled’ (p. 5). Our aim in the Certificate II course is to challenge students to locate information that may alter their mental model of a concept by providing tasks that motivate and engage, and to present information in a stimulating format.
Students working together in groups have participated in a variety of project-based assessments from public awareness campaigns on alcohol and drug abuse, and sexual harassment issues. They have also surveyed their communities to identify youth needs and issues. For example, the student’s youth work assessment task was to identify a youth issue in their community and produce a public awareness campaign that would raise community consciousness and provide information. Assessment criteria were given to the students, but how they were to achieve this task was defined by the group, with no restrictive boundaries imposed (Schrage, 1995). Hung and Wong (2000) advocate student project work and suggest, ‘The creation and evolution of community artefacts by student teams promotes thinking’ (cited in Oliver 2000, p. 6). Students place their campaigns on the blog for other groups to view and comment. The assessment tasks have produced a variety of community consciousness raising opportunities. Following are three examples of the orientation to youth work projects.

**Party safe short films**
Group A chose to develop short films on raising community consciousness of unsafe youth behaviour at parties. This adheres to Schrage’s (1995) theme of various representations and playing with presentations. As a group, the students developed a storyboard that included demonstrations of binge drinking, out of control behaviour, and the vulnerabilities that these unsafe behaviours generate. The students played the lead roles in the films and used the college car park as their location. The film was edited with Microsoft Movie Maker. The ‘Party Safe’ short films are to be distributed to students in other towns for comment. Some schools are also keen to use the films in awareness raising campaigns.

**Community lakes**
Group B surveyed young people in their community situated in north western Queensland. The survey results demonstrated the lack of youth activities in the town and identified the need for a water/fun park. The students, with their tutor’s support, then presented the findings in chambers to the local council. Underpinning this task was Schrage’s (1995) theme of the use of others to gain insight. The council in turn investigated, and through further community consultation developed a plan to seek funding. The council has since received funding and preparations
are underway for the development of a manmade lake that will cater to a variety of water activities.

**Police Citizens Youth Club**

Group C attended a town meeting on ‘What makes a community great for youth?’ The students participated in an open space forum where they were heard and their ideas valued and respected. The meeting participants identified the lack of activities for young people, a common theme in rural communities. The students formed a group from the meeting to seek out information to develop a Police Citizens Youth Club. The students are currently publicising the group at local schools and will chair a forth-coming meeting in an effort to seek funding for a Police Citizens Youth Club.

**Communities of inquiry**

These three examples of collaborative learning demonstrate the development of communities of inquiry to support and engage the learner through the creation of meaningful learning activities. The focus of our program shifted during this time when the team observed that technology based pedagogy was insufficient without the engagement of community-based collaborative learning and the development of a sense of belonging. According to the Cognition and Technology Group, ‘cooperative learning and cooperative problem-solving groups enhance opportunities for generative learning … students have the opportunity to form communities of inquiry that allow them to discuss and explain, and hence learn, with understanding’ (cited in Oliver, 2000, p. 9). Monique, a student commenting on her involvement in the PCYC community meeting stated that ‘this course teaches us to be more open with people and stand up for what we believe in’. The students feel they are heard and their opinions count. Another student, Amy said, ‘the Party Safe film brought the class together on common ground. It was a real life situation that made learning fun’. The student, school or community use the majority of the program’s project based assessments and this in turn contributes to the student’s sense of belonging to the community and social institutions. Group project based assessments facilitate the growth of communities of inquiry and are central to the engagement of students in a BDD environment.

The new learning technologies enable educators to step into the students’ space and situate the learning within the context of their cultural mores.
Henderson (1996) asserts, ‘Cultural context is the very stuff, the scaffolding, of instructional design if users are to be positioned as active participants who are given and take responsibility in the learning-teaching paradigm’ (p. 85). However, without the incorporation of technology based pedagogy with collaborative learning opportunities and supportive learning opportunities, engagement is not achieved.

Conclusion

This paper has examined the pedagogical parameters of a BDD model and proposed a number of issues for consideration. The findings of the action research illustrate that responding to the learners’ needs and creating active participation requires more than technology-based pedagogy. It requires a connection on a personal level within a holistic approach. The engagement of students in project-based assessments, collaborative learning communities and meaningful learning opportunities within a non-judgmental and safe learning environment fosters a sense of belonging and supports learners in accomplishing their educational goals. The use of the new learning technologies enables and encourages people and communities to work together through the sharing of interpretations, understandings, life experiences and skills, and builds on knowledge for not only the learner, but also the teacher. The paper demonstrates that the use of the pedagogical parameters in BDD is not enough to engage Gen Y without establishing a connectiveness with them.

Bonk and Reynolds (1997) refer to the WWW as a shared or common space that ‘is prime real estate for cultivating knowledge negotiation and the gradual building of inter-subjectivity among participants’ (p. 174). Our goal was to create a shared space in an environment that would nurture, stimulate and motivate whilst introducing the students to community work studies. The program was developed to be more than just a way of delivering education to geographically diverse communities; it was to engage and support. The learner, access to technology, the collaboration of other agencies to facilitate and support BDD, online needs and level of interaction are issues to be considered in the development of a BDD program. But, primarily the focus of the program became about providing a shared space of mutual respect and inquiry. This study found that in order to engage Gen Y in BDD the student’s voice had to be heard. The team
listened to that voice and created learning opportunities to engage and connect students to learning, each other and their community. The pedagogical parameters of BDD underline the need for a supportive learning community and to situate the learning from the student’s point of view. Educators must engage, support and cooperate with Gen Y in order for learning to occur. This very wired, social generation want more than to be told how something works. They want participation, real life encounters, support and respect. Gen Y wants to be engaged.

References


