Being online and really communicating

As information professionals we are aware of the wide range of online technologies available: webinars, social networking, podcasting, etc. I would like to share one library team's experience of being online and really communicating via a synchronous platform.

The Land and Environment Libraries team at the University of Melbourne is spread across four campuses and serves a graduate school that spans the four sites as well as a growing population of off-site patrons, nationally and internationally.

Driven by a need to develop more effective ways of communicating and meeting across all our locations, we explored the range of online tools available. We wanted something that gave us the ability to meet as a team and share audio, documents, and screens, but that was also easily accessed by our patrons, with no need to download any files or follow a myriad of instructions. We saw the possibility of also delivering online instructional sessions. To this end, we purchased five Adobe Connect licenses.

Really communicating online, especially without using video, means learning how to listen differently, allowing more space in the dialogue, and picking up 'body language' from the voice and what is happening on the screen. It also means being more conscious of how we are speaking and what we are doing. One of the key tips we suggest to new online presenters is to smile and use gestures when speaking as this makes a positive difference to the listener.

Presenting Endnote webinars has become one of our preferred delivery methods, partly because classes can be presented from any location, urban or regional, to anywhere within Australia and overseas, but also because of the interaction we have with the class. A coursework master's student, who would normally be on campus for only a two week block, was able to sit at his computer in rural Queensland and take part. Sessions can be conducted after-hours to provide flexibility for part-time students or staff who must work during the day. Participants communicate with others and the presenter via an open chat system, which has proven to be very interactive and builds upon class learning. Everyone participates and contributes to discussion, perhaps because of a sense of anonymity, but also because they are comfortable in their own space. We've found that online classes can be even more engaging than delivering face-to-face.

The Land & Environment Libraries team meets fortnightly online and also has extra sessions where we invite other staff to present as needed from their desktop. Feedback from the team to library managers last year was positive, with our online experience playing a key part.

Where to next? Through word of mouth and a few strategic workshops, there are now 25 Connect pro licenses across ten departments/work groups and a growing pool of online presenters and a variety of online events. We conduct regular team meetings, training sessions for other staff, weekly Department of Forest and Ecosystem Science seminars – with plans to include international presenters in the future, and delivery of a range of courses, sessions, and online reference support to off-campus patrons.

The library is well placed to take an active role as the university progresses its e-learning strategy. Whether we stay with our current platform or consolidate to a university standard system, the key learning is not the technology but the engagement that we can create and sustain online communities and learning. It's an exciting future!

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