Interview with Eddie Reisch

Hazel Owen, Ethos Consultancy NZ

Introduction

Eddie Reisch is currently working as a policy advisor for Te Reo Māori Operational Policy within the Student Achievement group with the Ministry of Education in New Zealand, where he has implemented and led a range of e-learning initiatives and developments, particularly the Virtual Learning Network (VLN). He is regarded as one of the leading innovators in the area of blended learning in K–12, and during his 30 years in education he has applied an unwavering belief that all learners can be the best they can when empowered to collaborate, make choices, be creative, and learn from their mistakes.

Eddie was interviewed by Hazel Owen, Director of Ethos Consultancy NZ on 10 January 2013.

Interview

Hazel Owen: There are numerous terms used to describe e-learning, and they are sometimes used interchangeably. What terminology do you prefer to use, and why?

Eddie Reisch: To be honest, I get really annoyed these days by the terms 'distance', 'online', and 'virtual' education and learning—we do not need a proliferation of terms any more. In education, we have spoken for years—since the internet was conceived—about merging the terms that apply to face-to-face learning and online learning. If we are truly experiencing a paradigm shift in education and learning then we need to start talking just about 'learning'. For the purposes of this interview, I will refer to a blended learning communities approach. With this in mind I will describe what I feel is the approach and then attempt to answer your questions in that light.

I have developed a diagram that captures what I feel the blended learning community approach to be.

Figure 1 Blended learning community approach

When we consider the learner as the centre of our focus and approach, who is in turn learning within the context of a knowledge-building ropu/group, then the teacher moves from being the director of learning to having the role of guide and mentor. The teacher no longer develops and implements the learning environment and approaches; this, in turn, empowers the learners to build knowledge. This approach embraces the active participation of all those who surround the learner.

The work environment is shifting and you only need to look at the music and paper industries to get a feel for what is happening and the difference in approach that is needed for a 21st century learner.

However, we are not just preparing our learners and students for the work force—there are elements of social and community needs that need to be met, and associated skills that need to be developed.

There is another important element missing for learners/students. In my opinion, we are so busy developing learning environments for education from a school or kura perspective that we have not bothered to join the learners within their world. They are already developing blended learning approaches with Facebook, Flickr, and by texting—Why are we so arrogant to think that our design and approaches are best?

Hazel Owen: How did you become interested in, and get involved in, virtual learning, or should I say, blended learning communities?

Eddie Reisch: I became interested in technology, computers, applications and the internet back in the early 1990s, inspired by my children who were then 10 and 8 years old. They were using technology in relation to their learning, as well as gaming and having fun. I personally loved learning the new apps and playing with different ways of doing things online. I created my first

website in Navigator Gold. Wow! What fun. I did see the potential that computers and the online environment could have on learning back then, but in hindsight, it was a very fuzzy view.

I guess the real answer to 'How did I get interested and involved in virtual learning?' in a more deep, meaningful, and structured way was through The Correspondence School in the early 21st century—2001 approximately. I was developing an online technology programme for years 9 and 10 and Derek Wenmoth was setting up an e-section of which I became the ICT facilitator. Wonderful and challenging experiences were just about to begin in earnest. I believe we referred to it as like being on a combination of shifting sand and a roller coaster, and it hasn't stopped since then! Sometimes I would like to go back under the blankets and hide, but on the flip side, it's way too much fun.

Since that time, some of the initiatives that I have been involved with have been with The Correspondence School and, later, developing the VLN on behalf of the Ministry of Education. I continued to focus on developing a blended learning community approach that included the Virtual Learning Network, the Virtual Professional Learning Development programme, English Language Learning in New Zealand schools [ELLINZ], and the Māori Medium blended learning community approach.

Hazel Owen: One of the main initiatives that you have been involved in at the Ministry of Education relates to the Virtual Learning Network. Can you describe for us what the VLN is, and how and why the VLN was started?

Eddie Reisch: I'll start with how the VLN website was established. The initial people involved were Derek, myself and Chris Allott-McPhee (better known as Cam). The VLN was originally conceived, and development mentoring while at The Correspondence School was by Derek Wenmoth, in 2002—credit where credit is due. Alongside the idea of a brokerage website for the VLN we also developed the *Learning Communities Online Handbook*. Both of these developments were done in collaboration with the sector.

The idea was to develop something that would help schools and kura broker programmes of learning across New Zealand, initially for the secondary school sector. So the brokerage site was designed to provide a portal to foster collaboration and the bartering of programmes as well as developing equity of access and communities of practice. An additional benefit would be to devolve the central provisioning of programmes and to enable schools and kura to own and develop their own relevant programmes, informed by local knowledge.

The first site was designed by the three of us and built by me in Dreamweaver. That was a mission considering my spelling is at best described as challenging!

Hazel Owen: What elements do you feel the group who developed the VLN initiative put in place that account for the ongoing steady growth?

Eddie Reisch: The first vital element was to focus on community collaboration. The VLN was built around the community of people representing the schools and kura and their needs, who were in turn represented by e-principals. From the start, we held monthly online meetings to discuss what was needed and this community involvement ensured a sense of ownership. We

were all intimately involved in the development of the VLN, and I believe that this ensured growth, sustainability and scalability.

Element two was the e-principals building meaningful rich relationships with their own schools and kura—so regional knowledge and people were keys to success. Alongside this was the development of national relationships between e-principals, which helped them understand and appreciate learners' backgrounds and their needs across the very different regions across New Zealand.

Another vital element was the support provided by the Ministry of Education.

Hazel Owen: What challenges have been faced by those involved in the initiative to implement virtual schooling in New Zealand?

Eddie Reisch: There were lots of challenges, but also lots of opportunities, and wow! The ride has always been interesting and varied.

Some of the challenges revolved around the fact that the technology layer operated as a vehicle for a paradigm shift in education, and a central question was how to use it effectively to bring about change. One challenge, for example, was demonstrating inclusive practice that adapts to fit the student rather than making the student adapt to fit the school or kura.

There were also issues around the cost of and access to bandwidth, applications, services, and digital devices. The lack of applications that are managed and owned by learners was a problem, although this situation is changing.

However, even when they own a device, at present the students tend to rely on accessing the teacher- and educational institution-controlled online environments.

On the positive side, the VLN communities such as the VLN Primary and ELLINZ programmes have set up environments for students that are run and managed by them to support each other and new students in the programmes.

An additional challenge for the Māori Medium and Pasifika sectors is the lack of applications that have been developed for their needs in the form of language packs and applications that recognise macrons etc. Ongoing concerns continue around the number of, and access to, assistive technologies for learners with special education needs.

Across institutions, policies needed to be developed, and practical challenges such as timetabling addressed and, of course, there was the ongoing hurdle of funding. Because of the shift away from traditional approaches into the online environs, it was necessary to provide opportunities for robust professional development, and to recognise and grow leadership.

Hazel Owen: You mentioned the VLN Primary Programme—I understand that over the last 2–3 years the VLN approach has been offered across the primary sector. Could you tell us a bit more about how this was initiated and how the students, parents, and schools have reacted to the opportunity?

Eddie Reisch: There was a requirement by the Ministry of Education to offer a language learning opportunity to junior learners. However, many of New Zealand's primary and intermediate schools and kura had no access to language teachers, or had access to only one language if they had a language teacher in their community, and students were missing out.

After discussions with people in the VLN communities, and with assistance from the Ministry of Education, we[1] decided to target languages as a programme of work. The idea was to offer language options online. The choice of languages would initially be limited, but the aim was to gradually increase the pool of teachers and range of languages from which students could select, no matter where they were located in New Zealand.

To date this programme has been an outstanding success as far as participation and collaboration are concerned, and the family and whānau reaction has been extremely positive because this initiative has allowed their children to learn a variety of languages.

This programme has developed and students can now choose from Chinese, German, French, Japanese, Spanish, and Te Reo Māori, as well as Astronomy, extension Maths, and Writing. One exciting development is Rosmini College year-12 students teaching health to 5 and 6 year olds online.

Hazel Owen: What are some of the lessons you've learned from the VLN?

Eddie Reisch: There are a number of lessons to be learnt, but isn't that always the way when you are breaking new ground?

I'd say that the key lessons are:

Develop, build, reflect and tweak in collaboration with the users…especially the students…and the feedback they provide, because the end recipient of this work must be the priority in the design. This goes hand in hand with embracing positively things that didn't go so well, and learning for future designs. It is essential to provide support for the learners, teachers, leaders and community, in particular in the form of pastoral support for students. Teachers also need to model the way students might learn in a blended community, and tailor sessions and activities to reflect their individual pace of understanding.

Three things to remember that will stand you in good stead are: one, be patient—good things take time; two, learn from your mistakes; and three, work collaboratively.

Hazel Owen: Does your experience with the VLN suggest frameworks that are relevant to understanding online education in the school sector? And what do you think are the main differences in fostering blended learning communities in K–12 compared with higher education?

Eddie Reisch: New Zealand is unique in the sense that the Te Marautanga o Aotearoa and the New Zealand Curriculum are not prescribed for schools and kura, so there is real flexibility in what can be achieved for learners. This flexibility aligns nicely with the Government's

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[1] I must thank Rachel Roberts for her dedication and passion in developing and implementing this exciting programme of work.

overarching goal to build an education system that equips New Zealanders with 21st century skills through the increased use of e-learning in schools.

The e-learning action plan, *Enabling the 21st Century Learner*, was developed to outline the key outcomes and actions for e-learning in the New Zealand schools sector for 2006–2010. This action plan outlined goals and a direction for e-learning in schools and how it directly contributes to the outcomes of the schooling strategy. It also identified how school-focused initiatives fit in with, and support, the wider range of digital and information communication technology strategies being co-ordinated and supported by the Government.

When you look at higher education, I don't know that it does differ that much to tell the truth. Both are financially and politically driven, and both aim to help students develop skills that will enable them to thrive in a rapidly changing 'connected' world. From a practical point of view some differences might include agency, for example. In higher education students are expected to be way more self-directed, will register themselves, and often are expected to set up their own accounts. In K–12 environments the accounts are usually set up for the students, sometimes with the requirement of collecting parental consent, and this has big implications for the administrative workload for schools. There are then associated policies around who should have … or needs … access to the data that is collected. In higher education, usually the data is accessible to the student, lecturer, and the institution. In schools, sometimes the student may not have access to all of their data, but their teachers and the school will, and parents and whanau as well.

Hazel Owen: Learning in blended learning communities isn't necessarily suitable for every student. Which students excel in these environments? And what traits do you feel learners…and teachers…need to have to get the most out of the approaches used in the VLN?

Eddie Reisch: I feel the way some virtual learning approaches are currently designed there are things that will suit certain characteristics of learners. However I *don't* believe there are any learners who will not benefit from a blended learning community approach. This sort of blended approach will ensure that learners who require different percentages of synchronous and asynchronous support (the asynchronous includes face to face) have their needs met so that they can achieve what they want to achieve. The focus is clearly on the learner. It helps when learners are open to change and willing to work collaboratively and share, because this helps them to maximise the opportunities to co-construct meaning with other students.

Hazel Owen: What advice do you have for teachers who would like to teach within a blended learning community?

Eddie Reisch: The technology layer offers so many opportunities beyond using technology as an information source. It provides collaborative spaces that can break down the classroom walls as we know them.

Teachers should embrace the changing paradigm and look for opportunities to fill the gaps for the learners they are involved with. This means that teachers themselves need to be willing to share, co-construct, co-mentor, and co-assess. Opportunities to develop the necessary skills and shifts in practice include becoming active…or maybe taking a course…in a blended

environment. Also, teachers could join an online community of practice with an interest in education, go online and experience the variety of spaces and learning opportunities that are out there, make things, reflect, make mistakes, tweak, and evaluate…just to name a few.

My advice is for teachers to empower their students—to listen to them, and encourage them to drive the learning. Building in choice should include the creation of networks that include a variety of teachers, other learners, and people and experts from local and global communities so that students have access to knowledge-building opportunities that no one person (usually a teacher) can provide.

Hazel Owen: What advice do you have for schools that would like to embrace a virtual learning approach?

Eddie Reisch: Fundamentally, schools and kura need to realise the impact that the digital world is going to have on education and businesses alike. They need to embrace that change and look for the opportunities to help learners be flexible, and to learn how to learn, not *what* to learn. The blended learning community approach has an all-inclusive learning approach built in—it acts as a framework for change and a shift in practice.

Hazel Owen: What advice do you have for others who would like to assume leadership positions in the field of virtual learning?

Eddie Reisch: We are in a new and brave world and there are some fantastic opportunities to really change the way we learn, and to learn 'just in time' not 'just in case'. My advice for people who would like to take on leadership positions is to be brave and to lead, not manage. There are likely to be challenges along the way, especially because the development of blended learning communities can be a difficult concept to describe and understand. Leaders will need to be skilled reflective practitioners who are able to listen to the students and work alongside them. They will also need to work across and with communities—not just those geographically located nearby but to also use the technologies to develop blended professional learning communities of their own.

Hazel Owen: What's your vision for the future of the VLN in New Zealand? And beyond?

Eddie Reisch: Wow! Here is a real opportunity for me to wag my tail. This, I feel, is the best approach within the constraints of our present education system and I am hoping the VLN will morph into a blended learning community approach sooner rather than later.

The vision is (and this links to my opening comments in this interview) to combine e-learning and face to face to become 'learning'. If you look at the comments and the diagram (Fig 1) above in connection with the blended learning community approach, these are the first stages of what is happening now in the projects and programmes that I have been involved with.

I think the key statement is that the learners will work as a knowledge-building community of practice. They will be interacting with and supported by people, organisations, and experts who will play an active participatory role in their learning. Participation will in turn be valued and recognised in the gathering of the data, and the data must show shifts in learning.

Hazel Owen: Given the expansion of the VLN in New Zealand, the roll-out of ultra-fast broadband, and the development of the Network 4 Learning, what do you see as the government's role in virtual learning?

Eddie Reisch: A blended learning community approach needs competition, collaboration and many other elements to make it work. Vision, leadership, policy, and funding are key factors, but they *must* be developed with and alongside the sector.

Therefore, the government needs to work in collaboration with the sector and I do believe that is happening now. There is a need to understand the fact that competition definitely has a place in the education sector, but it must be in the right place to be really effective.

I would hope that one day education becomes an all-of-government decision-making process.

Hazel Owen: As a final question, what else do you want to achieve both personally and professionally in the field of blended learning communities?

Eddie Reisch: I guess like everybody else, I just really want to make a difference. I do believe that I am really privileged to have worked with some real leaders—notably Derek Wenmoth and Kiritina Johnstone—over the last 13 years. As managers these two have been awesome, and because of their leadership and vision [they] have enabled me to do my work with trust and friendship, along with really good advice and encouragement. As far as other people that have really impacted me, truly there are so many in the Virtual Learning Network community and beyond I would struggle to mention them all. Sorry guys.

I do take my hat off to you all and thank you so much for making me who and what I am.

Personally I want to make sure my mokopuna (grandkids) get the benefit of me being active in their education through a blended approach. It would also be nice if my contribution to their learning is recognised in the system of education, as well as in the social and community aspect.

Professionally…well, I don't see any real difference between this and my personal desires and plans.

Hazel Owen: The initiatives you have described and been involved with certainly have the potential to pave the way for others who wish to adopt and adapt a blended learning community approach, both in schools and for professional development. Thank you very much for your time, Eddie.

Eddie Reisch: I think this article could be seen as a conflict of interest with my position at the Ministry so I want to make it clear these are my opinions—not those of the Ministry or the government of the day. I don't feel comfortable not being able to speak my mind and as the VLN was started many years before I went to the Ministry, I am prepared to take whatever consequences may come from this article.

Biographical notes

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Hazel Owen is an education consultant who has a keen interest in all aspects of e-learning where the focus is on ways to scaffold and empower learners. In particular, she is interested in (and has conducted research into) how creative, blended approaches to professional learning and development can create opportunities for contextualised applied learning, peer critique, encouraging reflective practice, and sharing experiences—the combination of which translate into an improved learning experience for students.