



Capricornia Online

A community online initiative in regional Queensland

Capricornia Online is a community online initiative in the Rockhampton district of Queensland which grew out of a government-funded project.

The broad project initiative incorporates the Communities on the Internet Academy (COIN), which provides ICT training, and Capricornia Online, which provides a virtual space where online communities of interest can develop.

The 'social appropriation' of technology

Capricornia Online was initiated by a staff member of the Faculty of Informatics and Communication at the Central Queensland University. It led to funding for the COIN Academy project in the form of a grant from the Family Community Network Initiative of the Australian Government Department of Family and Community Services (FACS).

The project is a partnership between Rockhampton City Council and the Central Queensland University, and the partnership has become the foundation for the project's sustainability beyond the period of FACS funding. Under the arrangement, the council meets wages costs while Central Queensland University provides the venue for the COIN Academy and meets equipment costs.

Capricornia Online was initiated in August 2002 to give effect to the 'social appropriation of technology' philosophy which has underpinned and driven the

COIN initiative. In addressing the digital divide, this involves the need to progress beyond access to appropriating technology for social and community purposes. The initiative demonstrates the distinctive features of spatial communities in the online environment.

Capricornia Online uses volunteer time and community input, so it has evolved as a low-cost, community-led initiative. These characteristics may be observed in the various online communities generated by this initiative, such as Multicultural Corner, Voices, Living History, and Fishing the Fitzroy.

Some 220 individuals and groups have signed up to Capricornia Online, including about 40 organisations and community groups. The focus up to now has been on developing the Capricornia Online model, with recruitment of a larger number of users seen as the next stage in the development process.



The Multicultural Corner

The Multicultural Corner has developed as an online community to promote dialogue with and between the various ethnic groups in the district, so that cultural understanding increases and Rockhampton is helped to develop as an inclusive community.

This network is typical of the 'mixed mode' or 'hybrid' approach found with Capricornia Online networks. The mixed mode approach combines face-to-face interaction with the development of an online community. Face-to-face interaction in groups is seen as necessary to building trust, confidence and to bond the group, so that barriers to the online experience are removed.

Whether the mixed mode model is a transition strategy or a permanent feature of online

communities linked to place is a question that will need to be monitored as online communities become more common.

The development of the Multicultural Corner also illustrates the significant role of champions in building these communities. Volunteers and mentors have had a key role in the development of Capricornia Online, and the leadership of a local volunteer champion has been central to the development of this network.

VOICES

VOICES is a community forum within the framework of Capricornia Online where community dialogue is fostered on a range of matters of interest to the community, and individuals can offer news or anything they are interested in.

VOICES originated as a discussion forum for displaced workers who had become unemployed when the local meatworks shut down. VOICES combined information for the workers with the opportunity for members of the group to articulate their views.

VOICES later developed a 'branded' dimension where the local television channel and talkback radio posted information on matters of general community interest. Subjects range over a broad spectrum of community matters such as traffic issues, dog registration, garbage issues, tips on fishing spots, and pests. In a number of respects VOICES shares the



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characteristics and role of talkback radio, except that there is no host to respond to or control the flow of community input.

Multicultural Corner and VOICES illustrate two key dimensions in the development of online communities within Capricornia Online. As this community framework matures further, it is probable that other dimensions will add to the richness of the mix.

Benefits

COIN provides a training program where local residents are able to develop their ICT skills. This can expand the range of economic and social opportunities available to them and they can apply these skills in the community setting via Capricornia Online.

The Multicultural Corner network illustrates a strategy for building bridging social capital in an ethnically diverse community. While communities of interest have an easy impact in building bonding social capital, cross-cutting activities such as the Multicultural Corner can be used in a more strategic way to build bridging social capital and develop understanding between groups.

Based on a regional model, the online environment facilitates a broader sense of community by facilitating exploration of community history, heritage and identity as a key aspect of community building.

Barriers

Up to now, the low ICT skill level of the community compared to the national average has been the main barrier to the broader community role and impact of Capricornia Online. An increase in ICT training in recent years, including the training role of COIN, means that this barrier is being addressed.

The COIN and Capricornia Online experience suggests that social and cultural barriers, rather than a lack of technology, are the main barriers. This view has led to the mix of strategies adopted for COIN and Capricornia Online. It was recognised that more champions needed to be drawn in as leaders so Capricornia Online would extend further into the community.

Key lessons

- Partnership action involving key stakeholders has been important to collaboration and development of the initiative. The partnership of Rockhampton City Council and Central Queensland University has been central to the success of this initiative.
- Having a guiding vision plays a key role in sustaining leadership and inspiring entrepreneurial action. The leadership role of Central Queensland University Faculty of Informatics and Communication brought a vision which has guided the initiative through all stages.
- The mixed mode/hybrid strategy was highly relevant. This project also suggests the relevance of this approach as an access and equity strategy.



- Insights were gained from the development process which integrates the COIN and training roles with progression to Capricornia Online and the establishment of a range of online communities.
- The critical need for local leadership to enable the community to take responsibility and ownership of the initiative was highlighted.
- Sustainability involves more than financial viability. It resides in whether there would be social, cultural, and educational losses to the community without the initiative.

Capricornia Online model could probably be adapted to the needs of other communities, especially elsewhere in rural and regional Australia. Further development of this initiative is also likely because of the interest in testing how a successful model can be promoted and increase the effect on a whole community.

References

Capricornia Online www.capricornia.org

CQU Faculty of Information and Communication www.infocom.cgu.edu.au

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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