



Keynote: FarNet Ten Years on—The Past, Present, and Future for Distance Learners

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Abstract

This think piece by Carolyn Alexander-Bennett is a reflection of her keynote speech at DEANZ2016 conference, which was held from 17–20th April at the University of Waikato, New Zealand. In her speech Carolyn revisits the issues, developments, and technology trends that led to the birth of FarNet (an online cluster of schools catering for the teaching and learning needs of rural secondary schools located in the Far North of New Zealand). FarNet eventually became part of the wider New Zealand Virtual Learning Network Community (NZVLNC). Adopting a strong Māori cultural underpinning in her role as e-principal of FarNet and a founding member of the NZVLNC, Carolyn describes current developments in FarNet and how the work at FarNet is informed by two key perspectives—Davis’s (2013) ‘arena of change’ and Fullan’s (2015) *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* (NPDL). She then outlines the opportunities and challenges offered through online and digital technologies to support teachers and learners in FarNet and the VLNC, and encourages the wider educational community to partner in their work to ensure the equity and success of future online school students.

Keywords: online learning; virtual schooling; VLNC; distance education; e-learning

Introduction

For those of us who commenced our teaching journey in the last century, it is important to remember where we came from and what is important to us, and to possess the courage to revisit that place where we first became passionate about our teaching. Identifying why we took up teaching is also important for teachers who trained in this century. Although we are in the 16th year of the 21st century, many New Zealand schools are still struggling to identify and develop the skills and knowledge that learners need for the future.

After 30 years of teaching in the mainstream schooling system I realise I didn’t become passionate about teaching—to the extent I am now—until 10 years ago. Before that, like many others of my age, I entered teaching because I was inspired by one of my own teachers and was told it would be a good profession to have when I had a family.

So teaching was a means to an end. However, I recall the day the fire in my belly was lit for online learning—the day I realised we could do things differently, and do them better, for our students in our rural schools. In 2004, when I was first introduced to video conferencing, I immediately saw the future potential for our students. Back then I had the opportunity to return to my old school in a leadership position, which was both life changing and challenging. I was forced to become familiar with my own cultural identity and realised the barriers that many of our rural schools, learners, and communities were facing. I learnt quickly the importance of who we are, where we come from, the journeys we have travelled, and the need to consider the future.

I also learnt the importance and significance of taking the time to learn about not only our own cultural identity but also the cultural identity and journeys of those we work with and are entrusted to teach. As the e-principal of FarNet and a founding member of the New Zealand Virtual Learning Network Community (NZVLNC), it was key for me to reflect on how we emerged as a community, the purpose of our community, and our current and future journeys.

The VCLN was an early adopter of digital tools to deliver online learning in New Zealand, and is often referred to as the pioneer in delivery of online teaching by video conferencing to rural communities, which was a significant shift from the traditional correspondence model of teaching. This said, pedagogy—rather than the tool—must be the driver for any change. Niki Davis's (2013) “arena of change”, for example, describes how educational organisations' ecosystems change and become more complex to impact on stakeholders, partner institutions, community, and whanau¹ with the introduction of digital technologies in education. At the heart of this, the change must be underpinned by a sound view of teaching and learning and considerations for the new opportunities that technologies can offer. Davis (2013) also suggests that the leader of an educational organisation needs to have a bird's-eye view of the organisation to observe the change theories relevant to innovations with digital technologies in education and training. Fullan (2015), for example, introduced us to *New Pedagogies for Deep Learning* (NPDL), which challenge online teachers to seek more engaging and effective ways to harness digital technologies in supporting learners to acquire deeper understanding. As more and more educators realise that they cannot continue to teach in the same way, using the same tools, there is an imperative to consider innovative ways to share the professional capital in schools. New Zealand is currently experiencing a crisis in the teaching profession, due not only to the average age of teachers being 55 and their planned retirement, but also because there is a dearth of specialist teachers in science and mathematics graduating from university. One outcome of this shortage is that schools prepare fewer students to enter universities in those subject areas. Eventually this results in even fewer qualified teachers. Access to digital technologies makes it easier for universities and other institutions to support learners and teachers in rural schools through networks such as FarNet.

Our FarNet context and the power of relationships

Māori, the indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand, are highly represented among our online students in FarNet. The research informs us that what works for Māori will work for all learners, although the reverse is not always true: what may work for non-Māori learners, does not always work for Māori (Bennett & Barbour, 2013; Bishop & Berryman, 2005). So in our practices, cultural responsiveness takes precedence over rushing into the content and curriculum.

The cultural concept of whakapapa² is important in Māori culture. In Māori culture everyone can trace their heritage. Bishop and Berryman's (2005) findings from the Te Kotahitanga project show the importance of relationships—relationships between teachers, their students, and their whanau—and the relationships between students and their peers in an online environment. Once these relationships are formed, learning can take place in a way that is conducive to learners.

FarNet can trace its own whakapapa back 16 years, when it began in isolated schools in Tai Tokerau (Northland, which is the region at the northern tip of the North Island) that were connected through a project which aimed to improve their telecommunications and video-conferencing facilities. Established in 2001, FarNet was one of the Digital Opportunities Projects that were set up as partnerships between government and leading information and

¹ An extended family or a community of related families living in the same area.

² Whakapapa is genealogy, the links and connections between people and their relationships over time.

communication technology (ICT) companies to bridge the digital divide. Following that project, FarNet was supported by a Ministry of Education Innovative Fund. Nine schools in the Far North were each provided with a dedicated set of video-conferencing equipment that is still operational and continues to work alongside other platforms providing web-based video conferencing.

A community will only work in a high-trust environment, and a high-trust model is the “glue” that enables the FarNet model to work. At the start of classes, discourse will take place between the class members, and the kaupapa³ will be set by the community, for the community. The teacher initially takes the role of the moderator in the conversations but moves eventually to privileging students’ voices. Our teaching practices in FarNet show that when students have a voice in the way their classroom operates, they respect and value the opportunity.

FarNet today

By the end of the final FarNet project funding in 2006, the Ministry of Education had recognised the need to support a fully funded full-time leader to manage each online cluster—a strategy that had been successful for two years for FarNet. Since 2006, FarNet has grown from 9 to 25 schools, which have used their operational budgets to continue to support the cluster to have a full-time leader. The business model therefore has a sustainable economy of scale.

A national movement, which includes FarNet, has emerged. Called the New Zealand Virtual Learning Network Community (NZVLNC), this network became a charitable trust in 2008. It consists of clusters of schools that include online in their offerings—members include FarNet, HarbourNet, Volcanics, Bay Link, Welcom, and a small cluster from the Wellington Loop. Two other clusters, NetNZ and VLN Primary, also work with the VLNC. Through collaboration, cooperation, and a great deal of goodwill, the VLNC share their human and institutional resources. As a result, learners from all over rural New Zealand (and, more recently, urban and city schools) are learning together through a range of video-conference platforms and online digital tools. Each learner has access to the best of our teaching profession and is no longer isolated or alienated by having to work alone in a subject where they may be the only student at their school studying that course. Learners can also collaborate and interact synchronously and asynchronously with their teacher and fellow class members. No longer must these learners choose between subjects with conflicting timetables, or enrol with the nationwide correspondence school Te Aho o te Kura Pounamu.⁴ In the past, if there were insufficient numbers to run a class or a school didn’t have a specialist teacher in that subject, students’ choices were limited. Now most subjects are available through the VLNC in clusters such as FarNet. Learners from across the country can link for an hour a week to a video conference with other learners and a teacher, and they have easy access to a wide range of learning resources throughout the week. Through FarNet, students get regular teacher feedback and opportunities to discuss their learning with their teachers and peers. This online mode of delivery has made learning more student-centric. The teacher often becomes a learner alongside their students and is also a mentor, problem-solver, and support person (Bennett & Barbour, 2013; Jeurissen, 2015).

Teaching and learning equity

In these rural communities, distance learning through FarNet has provided opportunities for students to remain at their own schools, in their own communities, with the support of their own families, to study an extensive range of curriculum subjects delivered by passionate teachers outside the four walls of their classrooms and school. Online learning provides equity; having the choice of living and learning where and when they want and with whom. Having ultra-fast

³ A set of values, principles and plans that people have agreed on as a foundation for their actions.

⁴ See <http://www.tekura.school.nz/>

broadband across a network managed by the Ministry of Education has thrown a lifeline to many rural schools. Students no longer need to struggle to use devices and digital tools. By using FarNet, rural schools can maintain a sustainable school population without threat of closure. Specialist teachers can continue to teach the subject they are passionate about, and share their expertise with a number of schools. The impact for these teachers is often huge; in the past, many teachers left smaller rural schools to teach their subjects.

We recognise that learning online does not suit all learners and that using digital tools is not easy for some teachers. Although students learn quickly that they need to manage their own learning (a core skill in New Zealand), some students prefer to be ‘spoon-fed’. However, we know that we are heading for a complete transformation in education for the digital age, and those teachers and learners may need a little more coaxing and pastoral care to move forward.

The VLNC model: A moral purpose

According to Barber and Fullan (2005), moral purpose in education involves the commitment of stakeholders to raise the bar and close the gap in student achievement. Educators need to be prepared to not just look outside the box, but to “bend the straight line”. Leading with a moral purpose entails being committed to making a difference in the lives and outcomes of students as a result of their experiences at school. The model used by the VLNC exemplifies the moral purpose among our member schools and clusters. The initial experience of teaching a course online, even for our most experienced classroom teachers, is said to be similar to the experience of a first-year teacher. Everything is so new: the technology, the online pedagogy, the digital tools, seeing the class only once a week, the close relationships that need to be built between teacher and students, the need to incorporate more student-centred approaches in their teaching... the list goes on.

However, the challenges of becoming an online teacher have recharged many of the older teachers in our schools who might have otherwise left teaching a long time ago. These challenges have provided extensive professional learning for them and their colleagues. The benefits of teaching online appear to outweigh the disadvantages as there are very few online teachers who stop teaching this way. With an increasing range of digital technologies at our fingertips, learners and teachers can join the online class from anywhere. We no longer face the financial barrier of expensive hardware preventing schools from engaging with online learning through the VLNC. This moral purpose supports our teachers to commit to the best of their practice to bring about the best of learning outcomes from their learners.

Davis’s arena of change

Niki Davis (2013) suggests that leaders need to take a bird’s-eye view of the organisation to observe the changes and apply theories that are relevant to innovations with digital technologies in education and training. This perspective has been very important for each of the existing online clusters. The technology changes rapidly and, as a community, we need to continually be aware of these changes—but not rush into changing practices and pedagogies just because they are the latest tools or apps. Learners must always be central to the ecosystems, and meeting their needs is paramount. Any changes need to be made and adopted with students’ needs in mind. Drawing from Davis’s (2013) arena of change, FarNet’s leaders were able to identify the huge changes that have occurred since FarNet’s establishment, and appreciate the complexities of what was initially a simple arrangement for 10 schools, supported by the Ministry of Education, to work together. Now a successful self-funded initiative for this school cluster and the wider nationwide networks, the VLNC is auditing its ecosystem to accommodate the future growth of online learning and to ensure that it remains relevant to learners and online communities.

New pedagogies for deep learning

Michael Fullan, a key person in the NPDL consortium,⁵ believes that there are currently powerful push–pull factors in schooling. The push factor is that school is increasingly boring for students, and alienating for teachers. The pull factor is the potentially motivational and engaging aspects of digital technologies. Fullan believes the push–pull dynamic makes disruptive changes inevitable. The NPDL six Cs (listed below) are the most important critical competencies needed by 21st century learners, regardless of where they live. The NPDL invites international partnerships, and FarNet is one of these through its fund-holder school, Bream Bay College.

FarNet has adopted the six Cs, which are:

1. Character: building resilience, empathy, confidence and wellbeing
 2. Citizenship: global knowledge, cultural respect, environmental awareness
 3. Communication: getting students to apply their oral work, listening, writing, reading in varied contexts
 4. Critical thinking: designing and managing projects which address specific problems and arrive at solutions using appropriate and diverse tools
 5. Collaboration: working in teams so students can learn with/from others
 6. Creativity and imagination: developing qualities including enterprise, leadership, innovation.
- (Fullan, 2013)

Where to next?

If, 10 years ago, I had tried to predict what online learning would look like, I would have been right about some areas but not others. The technologies are now far more sophisticated and easier to use than anyone could have imagined. Perhaps, as a community, the VLNC has operated under the radar for too long and it is time for us to let everyone know who we are, what we do, and what we have achieved. Whether we kept a low profile because we were pioneers and wanted to get our practices and processes right before we shared them with the world, or because we operated with limited human and financial resources, we simply met the needs of our existing communities who understand and appreciate what we do. Perhaps it's because that's who we are—a group of schools finding a solution to a local problem and learning to fix the problem ourselves. In the past we have been called a 'cottage industry' which is true in that we started by meeting the needs of our regions, but we have now turned into a national community through the VLNC. The downside of keeping under the radar and not sharing our successes has its disadvantages. For example, although FarNet clearly operates as one of the New Zealand Ministry of Education's Communities of Learning because we collaborate among our member schools and with other communities of learning, we are not able to access the funding that accompanies the Ministry's current model.

However, the FarNet leadership sees a very bright future in harnessing the digital technologies that are available, and continuing to provide great educational opportunities for our learners. Although the Ministry of Education has played a big part in funding and supporting our development thus far, and continues to provide some of the services through the video-conferencing bridge (to ensure all schools are connected) we hope we will also be recognised for our part in providing a digitally based education service. The Ministry of Education has recently announced changes that will allow school-aged students to enrol in full-time or supplementary online study with an accredited online learning provider as a “community of online learning”

⁵ See <http://npdl.global/making-it-happen/tools-and-processes/>

(COOL) instead of attending school in person (Jones, 2016). We know that we have a role to play in preparing schools to work online. Wenmoth (2016), for example, has blogged about the potential for such online learning in New Zealand⁶ and our VLNC leaders have been invited to engage with the Ministry of Education team responsible for setting up the COOLs. This is a very positive sign that the Ministry wishes to build on the work we have been doing in this online space.

FarNet is very fortunate to have partnerships with some universities that recognise that we are worthy of financial investment. These institutions have included FarNet in a number of projects, giving our learners and teachers access to online resources that will help to address the shortage of students enrolling in university STEM subjects.⁷ Such innovative partnerships are based on the strong networks and technologies already being used in our schools. Further to this, other universities have offered online learning through the VLNC for many years. This strategy helps learners to build a relationship with the university, and often results in the student enrolling as an undergraduate.

Implications for the future: What can we contribute to the journey ahead?

Students who have studied online while at school can be better equipped to manage their own learning and transfer their online learning competencies to meet the demands of the workplace or further study. Before the announcement of the COOLs, the VLNC clusters were approached by a number of schools that were dissatisfied with traditional models of distance learning. With COOLs on the horizon, do we need to stand guard against overseas providers that could flood the online space, offering courses online that are not based on the New Zealand curriculum, and have non-New Zealand registered teachers? All teachers need to reflect on how they deliver content to their learners and the best way is to identify which of the technologies best meets the needs of those learners. Learners must remain central to schooling. Learners' needs don't often change; they are one of the few constants in our ecosystems. What does change are the skills they need for an increasingly uncertain and complex future. As the educational, social, political, and economic landscape continues to change, educational leaders continue to reflect on our practices and modify them to meet those needs. This means we also become learners and are mindful that individuals have differing learning needs. Although we don't have a magic bullet, FarNet continues to look for ways that best engage our online students and raise their achievements through online environments. As the concept of the COOLs is further discussed and planned, the VLNC recognises that we play an important part in the discussion and have much to offer. The traditional African proverb, "It takes a village to raise a child" has been widely quoted in education, but in our connected world, in which some schools don't have enough specialist classroom teachers to offer the full curriculum, we need to take responsibility for educating all of our learners—not just those within the walls of our brick-and-mortar schools.

Note: The video recording of Carolyn's keynote speech given during the DEANZ2016 conference on 20th April 2016 is available at <http://bit.ly/2e8YFS0>

⁶ See Derek's blog, <http://blog.core-ed.org/derek>

⁷ Science, technology, engineering, and mathematics

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Biographical note

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Carolyn has had 30 years' experience in New Zealand secondary education with over 20 years in senior leadership roles. She became the e-principal of FarNet in 2006 following her role as Deputy Principal at Northland College, Kaikohe. She is an experienced online teacher, specialising in NCEA Accounting. She is also a member of the NZ Virtual Learning Network Community, a member of the Network for Learning (N4L) Advisory Group, a member of the Primary Principals and Teachers Association ICT Committee (PPTA), and is currently a member and President of the Northland Secondary School Principals' Association (NSSPA).

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