Chapter 4
Adopting Synchronous Audiographic Web Conferencing:
A Tale from Two Regional Universities in Australia

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a comparative study of two Australian regional universities with a similar student profile as they investigate the use of synchronous audiographic web conferencing as a learning and teaching tool. In both universities, the trials of the web conferencing tool, Elluminate Live! (Elluminate) were initially driven by individual academics with an interest in new technologies. While similar in some aspects at the beginning, the two universities then approached the software trials in different ways. As part of this comparison, issues and challenges relating to software trials in educational environments are highlighted, and recommendations provided for others who may be considering the adoption of similar technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The two regional Universities under reference in this case currently have similar student and delivery profiles, with a high proportion of off-campus (distance) students. The two universities are similar in that they both have small on campus and large distance student populations, and have track records for exploring the use of emerging technologies to improve the student experience.

One regional university has more than three quarters of the 26,000 enrolled students studying at a distance in local, national and international locations, while in the case of the second regional university, distance proportion is just over half of their 15,000 enrolled students. For both universities, many students live in remote areas with no physical access to libraries or face-to-face study groups. Moreover, a large percentage of students are of mature age, working full-time and fitting part-time study into their busy schedules.

SETTING THE STAGE

This chapter adds to the emerging literature on the use of modern audiographic tools identified in a review by de Freitas and Neumann (2009). It brings together approaches adopted by two regional Australian universities – the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) and Southern Cross University (SCU) as they investigate the use of web conferencing as a learning and teaching tool. A comparison is made of the paths to, adoption of and lessons learned from the use of web conferencing to provide education and development opportunities at USQ and SCU. The web conferencing tool, Elluminate, was trialled at both universities, with the process in both institutions being initially driven by individual academics (teachers) with a desire to investigate the pedagogical benefits of new and emerging technologies. While the trials were in some aspects alike at the beginning, the two universities then continued along different paths. Although the pedagogical considerations were comparable, the processes of evaluation, promotion of the technology to create a user base and the decision to adopt a web conferencing tool following the trials took quite different paths. For instance, at SCU the use of Elluminate has continued to expand while at USQ, despite the success of the trial, a different web conferencing tool has been adopted. Consistent with the aim of this book, these adaptations will be explored using the STEP dimensions, and the issues and challenges faced in each dimension will be highlighted.

The chapter is structured as follows. First, an overview of the organisational background of the two universities sets the stage by providing information on technology use for learning and teaching before the trials and then outlines the institutional moves to flexible modes of delivery. Information about the university contexts is provided as well as the motivations for using the web conferencing technology. Descriptions of the trials at institutional level are followed by more detailed case studies of two courses (one at each university) where the technology was implemented to support enhanced pedagogical outcomes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of issues and challenges identified by each institution along with a variety of recommendations.

USQ moved into distance education via dual mode teaching in 1977 as a viable alternative to the offerings at traditional universities (Reushle & McDonald, 2000). SCU entered this realm much later in the early 1990s but for similar reasons. This provision of distance education as well as classroom-based teaching has given both institutions a "multimodal" label. In traditional Australian distance education, a typical learning package consists of print-based materials sometimes supported by audio, video and computer-based resources. The package is designed to enable learners to interact independently with the materials. Frequently distance students were also supported by teletutorials and/or face-to-face workshops once or twice a semester. The emergence of learn-

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