An open letter to the professional communities of Australian Council for Computers in Education (ACCE)

Everything is an opportunity

Thank you Geoff for giving me opportunity to contribute to Australian Educational Computing wearing the cap of ACCE fellow. It is special to be able to contribute to this anniversary edition, even though in many ways my journey to be honored as fellow is quite short compared to my distinguished “fellow” colleagues who began the ACCE story. The “anniversary” does provide me with an opportunity to voice some professional reflection and prediction and it is my contribution to share these reflections.

Everybody needs to “talk”.

Computer education groups and professional societies that form the Australian body, have strength drawn from the volunteer leaders who give up much personal and professional time to ensuring that the debates about information and communication technologies (ICTs) in learning have audience in their states, territories and country. Much of the time these debates are located in the general profession and other times, they are located in the leadership communities of ACCE. Participation in the conversations gives the ACCE community life and vibrancy. Thus, the contribution of members to deepening professional discussions about ICTs is the most significant activity members can undertake as they value-add services of the ACCE groups. This might be through initiating staffroom conversations, by shaping agendas at staff meetings, by sharing practice with colleagues, parents and the school community, by asking questions, learning from others, listening and generally adopting the professional stance that we teach. Sometimes a good dose of determined stubbornness and dogmatism help. I am proud that my efforts have been recognized by QSITE (Queensland Society for Information Technology in Education) and ACCE but do smile at the “old-fella” teases I now receive.

A common belief in the charter of state and territory groups, ACS and ACCE is that we need to strategically influence colleagues, the profession, school systems and Government and give status to the issues which will influence the ICTs in learning agenda sensibly. In preparing for this article, I looked back over the contributions of my fellow fellows, Sandra, Ian and Anne, in publications and ACCE Minutes and recognized that each had led the ACCE family in this endeavor. Creating direction was the primary goal of the original constitutions and charters of CEGs (Computer in Education Groups) and ACCE when computers in schools first arrived, and my reflection while writing this article is that we need to again give prominence to this goal. It is through the deepening professionalism of Australian teachers and the conversations members have in the profession that will count now and in the coming years.

Deepening professionalism

It is easy to be misrepresented in a discussion of “deepening professionalism”, for it might be construed that the author is hinting that the profession is deficit in some way. This is, of course, not my message, and anyway, you know my beliefs and commitment to the profession (a benefit of writing to friends). There is, though, a responsibility for the profession to “talk” more about its understanding of its own profession and to give consultancy to government, employers and the community. Professionalism is an attitude, exhibited through action to an audience who will value the expressed commitment and take notice of the collective views of the group.

The standards debate nationally is an opportunity for the profession to describe the ICT practices which consistently improve student learning, curriculum design, pedagogy and professional work. We need to show we have the maturity and professional enunciation which rises from a long practice of professional
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conversations, to describe what we mean to an audience who need and look for direction from us. In some states and territories, the leaders in CEGs have done precisely this and now the ACCE body must continue this work and every member must help. In doing so, we must give voice to the national agendas which recognize that ICTs in education is not only about using ICTs in learning in all curriculum frameworks, as they change and grow in the next few years, but that ICT leadership, in-service leadership around ICT agendas, ICT and computer studies in all its forms and ICT infrastructure, design, implementation and management all contribute to the ICT landscape in this country and each directly links to Government agendas and community demands. A mature, knowledgeable and active profession can do this. In a sense it’s a collective professionalism.

The Commonwealth Government in some respects has given a platform for professional associations through the new National Institute for Quality Teaching and School Leadership (NIQTSL). The operating principles of NIQTSL were drawn from the work of teacher associations and we can see evidence of this is our (collective) charters.

Operating Principles of NIQTSL

- National perspective
- Engaging the profession
- Catalyzing action
- Focus on quality teaching and school leadership
- Advocacy
- Collaboration and communication
- Evidence base
- Independence (NIQTSL 2005)

NIQTSL has a number of subprojects including standards development and promotion and using them to shape and give voice to professional leadership. We must contribute to that debate actively, or we may be asked to accept and implement standards which do not recognize the breath of our work. Only we know and understand that Governments focus on improving ICTs in learning by students, often surrounded by the silence of our work – ICT leadership, Computing studies, ICT infrastructure design and development and general direction setting by ICT leadership in schools. Now, more than ever, is the time to be more vocal and broaden the debate to include the enabling factors for student learning in a digital age.

Personally speaking

Our role in the professional community on a personal level includes supporting the journey of others and helping them become aware of and then using the significance of the professional communities in ACCE associations. In a sense, it is about supporting colleagues as they travel a conversational journey, from teachers talking about their professionalism as an employee undertaking the core business of the association, to improving their conversation to represent themselves as teachers whose professional influence extends well beyond the workplace, undertaking the responsibility to be both contributors and learners. As members of the ACCE family, we need to practice the conversations about this journey and articulate clearly the conditions that support the journey. Our purposes can be best expressed as questions.

How does the professional educator receive by giving, and how does professional conversation mature as a result of collegiate dialogue, even at a personal level?

Can this professional conversation make public, the depth and maturity of thinking in the profession, about ICTs in educational endeavors?

Can this conversation enable the synergy of deep collective thinking to mature more quickly and be substantive in its effect and influence?

The following representation of the journey is just one example nationally of how conversation in the profession can assist us all to develop and then represent our thinking. Over the past four years Lindy McKeown, currently working in the Ipswich and West Moreton Districts of Education Queensland and long term QSITE contributor, has been representing the types of professional conversations and perspectives which illustrate the depth of professionalism in her local communities. By sharing the model with her personal professional community of like-minded leaders, it has matured to describe the circumstances which enable teachers to represent themselves beyond merely “dedicated employees” to include their roles as “active professionals”. Much work remains to improve and clarify this representation and it will mature as more colleagues contribute to it, use it for their purposes to stimulate discussion and reflection and share back their thinking.

“It is through the deepening professionalism of Australian teachers and the conversations members have in the profession that will count now and in the coming years.”
This example not only illustrates the major point of this short dialogue (short for me!), but illustrates the practice which needs to become endemic in the ACCE community. It is by making public our developing thinking within the profession that enables us to mature it to a point that is able to be shared with Government, other professional community and school communities.

And so it remains.....

For professional associations in ACCE to provide the conversational platform within the profession, as a catalyst for development in the future. The journals, newsletters, public meetings and conferences strongly pursued by member associations continue to have significant contribution and importance. It is often the task for volunteer teams to make prominent, the project management goals to ensure events happen on the behalf of members, but I call on them to also consider the professional positioning of such events. It is vital to change the nature of our forums to enable greater intellectual debate, more opinions, substantive research and focused conversations on the profession shaping the future of ICTs in education. About a third of the program of our professional events needs to enable the profession to talk to each other about issues beyond their day-to-day work. This will be a significant indicator of the maturation of the ACCE family. Such a benchmark gives me a personal goal within my responsibilities to influence and lead the team of members hosting the ACEC 2006 conference in Cairns on October 2-4 2006. (Taking opportunity again!)

The understated attribute of the representation, Lindy has taken responsibility to develop for us, is the power of online communities for living in your professional community every day, as a contrast to the spasmodic influences of publications and face-to-face events in a professionals journey. Although this comment has an attribute of “preaching to the converted”, it is also significant to reflect on the impact of online communities to the outstandingly progressive development of conversations. I looked back in my archives recently to rediscover the first major debate in oz-teachers which we began in the early 90s. The conversation on “mouse balls” went for over 5 weeks and had over 200 contributions on the topic. One teacher even bought 1000 superballs of “just the right size” and offered to distribute them to schools. Although seemingly comical in nature now, it represented our first attempts within months of Internet access in this country to use the media for professional conversation. In contrast, the conversations now on Echalk from Western Australia and QSITE-community and its partner lists are substantive in nature, highly influential and have a huge audience in the profession. I wish I had kept a diary over the years of the people who have told me QSITE community is a lifeline and their only friends at times... I am sure the sentiment towards the state email communities and now the growing number of blogs, wikis and community web sites from other CEGs is also powerful testament to depth of maturity in professional conversation when this profession we know and love, talks every day.

In closing, I do want to use my privileged position as ACCE fellow to appeal to CEGs and ACCE to continue to use online community tools and services to maintain momentum in the professional community and to develop strategies to develop high-order conversations which enable the leaders in associations to articulate maturing perspectives, opinions and conclusions. It is also an appeal directly to CEGs who have not developed online community to do so now and to ensure they are open beyond the membership. Closed communities do not mature and do not address our core charter of giving public voice to the core beliefs of the ACCE group of associations.

The PS is of course, to continue this conversation at ACEC 2006 in Cairns on October 2-4 2006.

Kind regards
Michelle Williams

REFERENCES