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Inclusive E-support, the second stage: real-time e-counselling, e-career counselling, m-contact counseling, m-support

Organisation profile

Box Hill Institute of TAFE (BHI) is a registered training organisation (RTO) with over 30,000 enrolments, including 2,000 off-campus students. The project is an initiative of the Centre for Student Support Services (CSSS) with support and collaboration from the Centre for Open Learning Services.

The Framework connection

The trial was funded and supported under the Inclusive e-Learning Project, which is part of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework). The Framework provides the vocational education and training (VET) system with e-learning skills, professional development, resources and support networks to strengthen the skills base of Australia. Under the Inclusive e-Learning Project, innovative education, training and disability professionals from across the country applied for funding to improve employment-related training opportunities for people with disabilities through the use of appropriate e-learning resources and technologies.

Why this trial?

From 2004–2006 counsellors at BHI developed specialisation in online text-based counselling using an a-synchronous messaging system developed from within the in-house learning management system (LMS), the Disability Liaison Student Service (DLSS). Students successfully utilised the e-counselling service via the StudentWeb intranet. The Performance Agreement Report *E-Learning Pilot* delivered to the Office of Training and Tertiary Education (OTTE) following the successful pilot, became widely disseminated as a reference for other TAFE student services providers interested in initiating their own online support.

A set of developments building on the current e-counselling service was proposed to further increase flexibility and access; and ensure support is enabling and inclusive by increasing options for students with mental illness, hearing-impairment, learning disability, physical or visual impairments, mobility issues or severe language disorders.

The aim of the 2006 project was to further develop our specialisation with text-based support via technology.

With the high usage of Instant Messaging (IM) amongst young people, development of a secure synchronous chat counselling system was perceived as a natural extension of the

current e-counselling service. In addition, with the prevalence of mobile phones amongst students with disability and counselling clients, it was hoped to introduce various types of support using SMS. Extending the speciality we have developed in text-based support, to using SMS between counsellors and students' mobile phones to facilitate greater continuity of contact, brief contact monitoring and ongoing support as an adjunct to face-to-face support.

Finally it was hoped to improve engagement and delivery of online support in areas such as careers counselling.

Box Hill Institute was supportive of the proposition that our developing specialisation in these areas could be combined with mentorship of another TAFE interested in developing online tools (Western Institute of TAFE in New South Wales), as well as general dissemination of expertise amongst the VET system.

Within the institute's CSSS there has also been cross-fertilisation with a companion Framework Inclusive e-Learning trial focusing on the delivery of supports for youth.

Key features of the trial

Staff training

Having successfully piloted e-counselling after the completion of stage one, integration of training in online skills was considered a key feature. This has included expanding skills across the Student Support Services team, where a culture of exploring, developing and integrating technology tools becomes embedded in the organisational context. With staff movements occurring an initial task involved training a new group of staff in online counselling and in preparation for use of some of the tools we were aiming to introduce. Three student support staff involved in various counselling related positions commenced training during 2006.

Microsoft Network (MSN)¹ Live Messenger and Live Classroom

Some early steps were made to begin evaluating potential tools for communication with students. A large group of student support staff participated in a demonstration of the TAFE VC live classroom program. This was considered potentially useful for its live chat component and interactive whiteboard – a feature already in place for online counselling with KidsHelpline².

The same group of staff were also signed up to MSN Instant Messaging (IM) for the purpose of communicating amongst staff and experiencing, as vast numbers of our students do, a real time chat environment.

MSN is probably the most popular chat environment for young people at present. It allows for rapid exchange of text (as well as including voice tools), instant awareness of who else is online, easy addition of new contacts, group chats; and for easy inclusion of emoticons (smiley faces). Yahoo IM is also popular for its use of avatars and wider range of communication symbols.

¹ <http://www.msn.com>

² http://www.kidshelp.com.au/home_KHL.aspx?s=6

MSN as 'corridor' support

A feature of needing to provide access and inclusivity in delivering student support services is to plan visibility and outreach. At BHI there are a group of support staff working with students at risk of not remaining in schools. Some of these students have psychiatric disabilities or emerging mental health difficulties. With the challenging background and circumstances of these students, a lot of the face-to-face work occurs through setting the context of a relaxed drop-in environment and intensive outreach of support staff, rather than in formal face-to-face counselling (although the informal contact can allow for facilitation into face-to-face counselling when necessary).

MSN IM can in many ways provide an online version of an intensive outreach support model. It provides informal contact and makes clear and visible the availability of both the student and the counsellor. The opportunity for text-based communication is an advantage of the online environment for particular types of students.

Case example

Roland is a 22-year-old student with a genetic condition that in his case includes skeletal and eye deformities. Roland also has Aspergers Syndrome which particularly affects capacity for social interaction.

After a number of months in face-to-face counselling, progress was made with development of social skills and issues around bullying incidents. Despite improvement in skills Roland still finds social interaction difficult with poor eye contact and difficulty initiating conversation. As Roland was keen on using his computer and already a regular user of MSN it was decided to supplement contact with MSN. This has improved ease and regularity of interaction and has helped improved therapeutic alliance. Through this medium Roland's love of music has emerged as a discussion topic (as a result the counsellor's until now sketchy knowledge of the music of Pearl Jam has vastly improved!). In future it might be useful to take part in MP3 audio file sharing and introduce Roland to other social software tools such as MySpace³ (if he doesn't introduce the counsellor to it first). It also means that face-to-face contact does not need to be as regular, and when required can more easily be facilitated.

MSN and other IM tools such as Yahoo IM and Gmail IM provide an easy connectedness with students. While not suitable for counselling because of the lack of encryption, they remain useful social tools for helping students remain engaged and interested in contact with a support person.

One feature of MSN is that conversations can be saved for future reference if necessary. SMS tools for synchronous counselling are discussed below.

SMS (Secure Instant Messaging)

Background

A Falcom desktop SMS service had already been in place within the institute's DLSS. This provided a mobile phone-like unit that connected to the back of the computer and which would transmit messages from a desktop program. At the time we came to investigate this program for further use there were functional problems with its operating.

While a serviceable program at a reasonable cost (20c per SMS plus one off set-up fee) it was thought necessary to look elsewhere for something with greater reliability and flexibility.

³ <http://www.myspace.com/>

The institute's DLSS had built within it a program for sending SMS out to students. However this was only a one-way service such that students could not send a reply.

The option of a system with a reply function and for a dedicated number to be available needed to be considered. A Framework 2004 New Practices in Flexible Learning project report *Txt Me: supporting disengaged youth using mobile technologies* made a number of recommendations:

- technology can be used to build stronger relationships
- the technology used needed to be reliable
- a desktop interface is important
- having dedicated numbers for each teacher would help increase the trust between students and teachers
- investigate options outside of the immediate telco provider
- find a telecommunications provider who is more interested in developing a personalised solution for your needs than selling a standard package which has been designed for commercial operations.

A lot has changed since the Txt Me report was written in 2004. For one thing 40% of the world population now owns a mobile phone (source wikipedia⁴). To meet the demand there are now flexible and powerful software options to meet various demands. There is no reason to believe that the dramatically rapid rate of development and use of technology in personal communication will not continue.

Messagemedia⁵

When investigating desktop SMS options it became clear to management that SMS contact and support with younger students was very popular with them and that there might also be cost savings in reducing calls to mobiles. As a result the responsibility for implementation of software across the centre was given to the project leader. This had the advantage of being recognised as a leader in innovation; and the disadvantage of draining project time and resources whilst implementing a much larger centre-wide activity. Such is the interest around SMS at present that it now appears other areas of the institute will be looking to implement the student support system.

Messagemedia was chosen as the platform for SMS delivery for a number of reasons:

- Cost – 22c per message incorporated within a monthly fee of \$25.
- Dedicated numbers – for a set-up fee it was possible to purchase separate numbers for each service or if necessary each individual. Dedicated numbers for each individual counsellor was prohibitive. Instead a few numbers were allocated, one for reception, one for counsellors as well as separate numbers for other groups of support staff. Acquiring each dedicated number is equivalent to taking out a mobile phone plan – only in this case using the computer interface instead of a mobile phone.
- Flexibility – interface can operate from a desktop computer or as an online SMS gateway, no modem is required. This allows counsellors to use the service from multiple locations, inside or outside the institute.
- Security – messages have the option to be sent via encryption.

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_mobile_network_operators

⁵ <http://www.message-media.com.au/>

- Reliability – **message**media use Telstra to send messages with Vodaphone as a back-up rather than overseas providers. Also **message**media state that the system was down for only two hours over last 12 months. There is also excellent back-up help desk support and ongoing updating of the program.
- Self administration of program – this requires that at least one of the staff becomes an administrator of the system, allowing users to be allocated and passwords and permissions to be set.
- Scheduling – **message**media provides the option for scheduling the sending out of messages at predetermined times – for example for daily activity reminders.
- Group applications – the same message can be sent to several students at once.
- Headers and footers: standard messages (for example “BHI counselling trial SMS”, “you can reply by SMS”) can be made to automatically appear in each message sent.

SMS applications in supporting students with disabilities

- appointment bookings
- reminders of appointments
- reminders about therapeutic activities (counselling ‘homework’)
- scheduling of messages between appointments to arrive at specific times
- messages of support to individuals
- maintaining of contact
- reinforcement of activities in group program
- maintaining of group cohesion
- tracing students otherwise difficult to contact.

SMS guidelines

Draft SMS guidelines as developed are included with this report (refer Appendix 1). These guidelines are in addition to previously written guidelines for e-counselling that might already apply to SMS (for example not leaving messages on-screen, ensuring that printing of messages is in accordance with privacy, etc.)

SMS samples

Original message	Reply message
Hey A, Its Emma here from TAFE. Hope u ok I tried calling u! I wanted 2 give you some info. U can call me tomorrow if you like Ph: 92869891. Take Care	Hi its aaron here. Sorry i missed your call my sister had just called. I will give u a call tm. Thank you for collecting the info for me!
Hi A, How are u? Its Emma here from TAFE. I just wanted 2 see how u are going in your Fashion course? Hope u well. Take Care	Hi emma, this is aaron. Kinda needing to talk to you, still Havnt been able to talk to vicki and also im havin a bit to trouble with another class. Notsure what to do. Maybe if u could give me a call or maybe meet up tm ill be in school in the avo if you
J, hope u r well. Did u get the letter? I can't meet today can we meet Fri @ 12.00 or 3.30pm? Thanks Simone You can reply by SMS if you wish	hi simone i got the letter but i need to see you asap about the weekend. J
Hi J, How r u going with work, fun & fitness? Simone	Hi simone, Yeah im slowly getting thru all the homework and gym is a good escape from it. J
Hi R, this is a reminder about practicing your homework including the thoughts and feelings diary, and practicing some eye contact. Cheers, Howard.	
Hey A, How are u? Hope u well. How is the druming going? Look forward to hearing your demo tape. See u at 11am today same place as last time. Emma	Hey emma im good hey im going to be super late today so i was wondering about maybe changing my app to a later date i would have contacted but i didn' have your number till no
BHI counselling trial SMS: Hi J, We had an appointment for 2pm today. Is everything ok? You can sms a reply or my number is 9286 9891. Cheers, Howard	I changed it to next week cos i couldn't make it. My car broke down. I've started eating again. The grounding is really helping. Thanks. J :)
BHI counselling trial SMS: ok that's a relief. Keep going with the grounding and remember you can message or phon eif you need. Cheers, Howard	Thanks

Synchronous counselling

Approach

With the universal success and acceptance amongst support staff and students of the SMS system, in looking for an external platform for synchronous counselling, a similar flexible, economic and useable system was sought.

Products available

Research was put into possible IM products available. The institute's LMS did not have capacity for adapting an instant messaging component as had been the case for stage one of the e-counselling development. (Some LMS's such as Janison have an IM application that may be adaptable to a counselling environment.)

Related computer classroom applications such as Live Classroom⁶, Elluminate⁷, Centra⁸ etc were also considered for adaption, with some trialling, via the IM component. However due to the lack of security, the inherent slow set-up and the potential firewall issues, it was decided after an initial demonstration, not to use these programs. One attractive feature of these type of programs is the virtual whiteboard enabling different types of expression and the potential for art therapy approaches. (The recently developed OCco software⁹, currently on trial with Kidshelpline¹⁰, may provide a future online counselling application for those interested in art therapy, and/or using art and symbols for use with certain intellectual disabilities.)

BitWise¹¹ IM was chosen as the preferred program as it presents several advantages:

- Simple interface: BitWise has a friendly look with a simple looking easy to use design – as if it could be a part of a Google application
- Security: BitWise has excellent encryption. It also transmits instant messages directly between parties rather than going via the company itself – reducing potential privacy issues.
- Cost: there is a special rate for educational institutions of US\$2 per user, per month. This is affordable and given that at times there may only a handful of students might use the service each month, we would only be paying for what we need.
- Administration: similar management requirements to **messagemedia**.

From the users' point of view, students would need to sign up (or be signed up by staff) to the BitWise system before commencing online counselling.

Because of its flexibility, BitWise has run into firewall problems at Box Hill Institute. It appears that the problem may be that the information technology (IT) department is willing to open one firewall port (for a program such as Elluminate) and that BitWise, as a result of its flexibility, requires several ports to be opened simultaneously. This highlights an issue with social software generally where the more flexible and enabling a program is, the more likely it is to encounter this type of problem as illustrated by the following diagram. At the time of writing we are still awaiting clarification from the IT department about the workability of BitWise.

⁶ <http://www.horizonwimba.com/products/liveclassroom/>

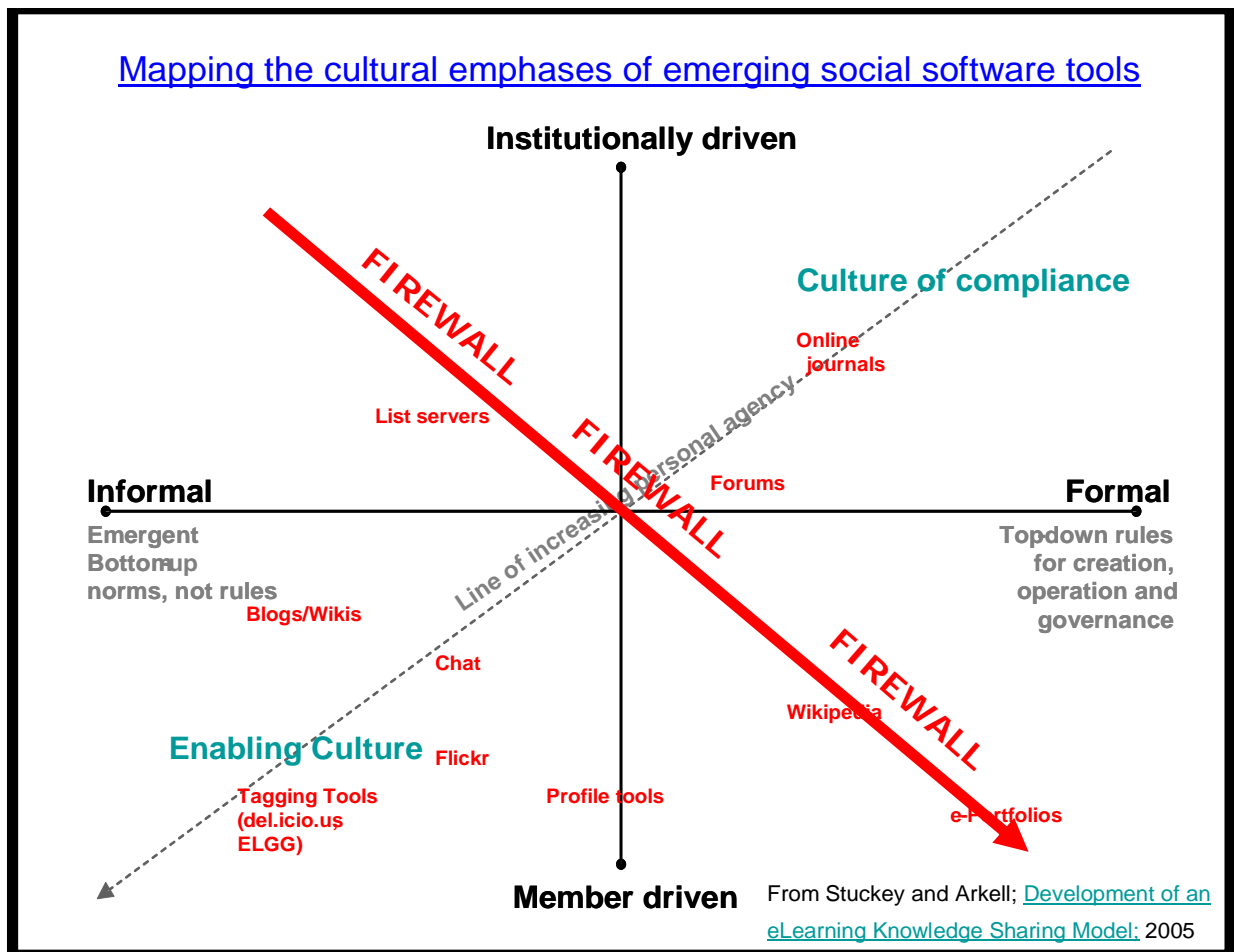
⁷ <https://sas.illuminate.com/>

⁸ <http://www.centra.com/>

⁹ <http://www.cicada.net.au>

¹⁰ <http://www.kidshelp.com.au>

¹¹ <http://www.bitwiseim.com>



Other products

CryptoHeaven¹² - a potential alternative with good encryption that may require only one firewall port open.

ChatBlazer¹³ – a secure platform potentially integratable into a LMS.

VIA 3¹⁴ – offers maximum security, probably more than required for a TAFE environment – but used by some counsellors overseas.

Possible solutions for IM in TAFE require that the service either needs to look like it is seamless within the institute system; or operate via an internet based solution with which students are already familiar. An ideal scenario would be a secure form of MSN.

Dissemination

With Box Hill Institute's developing expertise in this area there has been increasing demand for consultancy and training within the TAFE sector. Information about our e-counselling has been provided to TAFE staff at Kangan Batman, William Anglis, Victoria University, TAFESA, Central TAFE (Perth), OTEN (Off Campus NSW). Mentoring has been provided to student services at The Western Institute of TAFE (NSW) in their own Framework Inclusive e-Learning (Disabilities) project, to put part of their student services

¹² <http://www.cryptoheaven.com>

¹³ <http://www.chatblazer.com>

¹⁴ <http://www.viack.com>

(including counselling) online. Speaking engagement invitations have included the TAFE Disability Managers Forum, and the E-dayz (South Australia), conVerge (Victoria) and Queensland University of Technology conferences. Specific training in online counselling has been provided to two groups of TAFESA staff from the north and south regions. Finally as recognition of the importance of the Framework's and BHI's project work in providing support to students with disabilities through technology, the project has received international recognition through being:

- invited to establish and moderate a discussion forum for *Online Counselling in Education*, for the International Society for Mental Health Online, and
- invited to present at this years Online-Educa conference in Berlin about *Online counselling to facilitate access and equity*.

Challenges

- continuing the integrity of the developments to date, in that development is driven by value to students, inclusiveness, student needs and changing student communication patterns
- popularity of SMS system requiring increased project effort as demand for the same service spreads to other parts of the institute
- firewall issues with IM.

Outcomes

- outstanding success of SMS as reported by both students and staff
- IM remains an ongoing project until a workable technical solution is found that forms a seamless part of our service
- aA role for MSN in 'corridor' support of students
- recognition of BHI's and the Frameworks' efforts in mentorship, consultation, advice and invitations to present
- cultural change within the Centre for Student Support Services and BHI about the applicability of technology in supporting students – for example in areas such careers counselling where efforts are being made to improve the online interface. During 2006 Student Support Services has also been asked by the institute to lead a development project to improve StudentWeb – the institute's student intranet.

Future directions

There remains tremendous potential future adaptations of the SMS support:

- For students with disabilities, particularly a mental disorder or hearing impairment, isolation within the TAFE setting is a risk. Connectedness – a well founded sense of belonging to the learning community of the institute or a particular teaching centre – is of great benefit. The strategies explored have great potential in easily and effectively adding to the support links which can be offered.
- Sending standard messages of support and encouragement to make contact, to counselling clients during transition periods (for example, Week 5 when students seem to experience initial pressure of study, or during exam periods).

- Highlighting special events, recruitment for group programs, or conducting surveys with specific target groups.
- Tailored messages to specific target groups (for example, students with disabilities, youth, mature age, international students, students at risk, non-attending students etc).
- Advertising of specific numbers to encourage students to make contact via SMS for support.
- Group support for BHI's In Sync group program, teaching coping skills to young people, most of whom have psychiatric disabilities.
- Follow up after critical incidents.
- Evaluation of services and programs, both immediate and delayed (six months or more).
- Notification of changes in the service (new staff, close down periods, new services and resources, venues).
- Notification of new content on the StudentWeb (self help etc).
- Reminders to read e-counselling pages/counsellors' replies.
- Information about specific welfare matters, for example safety.

It is hoped that IM and chat counselling will become an integrated feature of student support.

The project team in the future hope to investigate the applicability of teleconferencing in support of students with the application of new state-of-the-art technology at Box Hill Institute.

Credits

Txt Me: supporting disengaged youth using mobile technologies, Australian Flexible Learning Framework Evaluation Report, Christine Bateman, November 2004
http://pre2005.flexiblelearning.net.au/projects/media/txt_me_evaluation_report.pdf

Michael Coghlan - for provision of social software diagram.

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Draft SMS guidelines for counselling staff

Possible uses for SMS

- appointment bookings
- reminders of appointments
- reminders about therapeutic activities (counselling 'homework')
- scheduling of messages between appointments to arrive at specific times
- messages of support to individuals
- maintaining of contact
- reinforcement of activities in group program
- maintaining of group cohesion
- tracing students otherwise difficult to contact.

Messagemedia system

The **messagemedia** system provides both a desktop and a web interface. These systems have a very similar interface with *compose*, *inbox*, *sent items* and *administration* windows available.

CSSS has numbers specifically allocated, one for counselling and one for our reception desk. All numbers for student support are listed here. Each number is attached to a licence: ie they are each a separate mobile number contract used via a computer interface.

Costs

Each number has an initial setup cost plus the monthly cost of messages.

Each message costs 20c plus GST (ie 22c). To divert a number costs 20c for each divert or undivert. To use the message tracking facility costs and extra 10c per call.

Help

Help is easily obtainable by calling the **messagemedia** helpdesk number. 1800 155 228

Usage suggestions

1. Beware of content - SMS is not for counselling. While some contact and content may be therapeutic it is important not to discuss items of a personal nature.
2. Consider using the client's first initial at the beginning of the message, rather than their full name to improve privacy in the case of messages seen inadvertently.
3. Privacy - students should not receive messages unsolicited. Their permission to be contacted by mobile phone (and preferably by SMS) needs to be gained first.

Information storage

Messages are stored indefinitely at **message**media. In order to have a direct relationship with the information confidential storage needs to be created. This can be done by either storing messages on the institute's computer system with password protection, or by printing out messages and locking them in the filing cabinet with hard copies of files. Messages need to be treated in the same way as other health records.

At present CSSS is keeping hard copies as SMS messages do not take up much space. These messages are downloaded monthly (from the bottom of the *inbox* page) and printed from MS Excel.

Storage of sent messages at **message**media changes after 45 days after which accessing for the purpose of printing becomes more difficult – hence the need for monthly meetings.

Making file notes.

All SMS messages sent and received need to be noted on the client's hard copy file.

Encryption

Encryption is available via the alternate login <https://access.m4u.com.au/websms>