VUSSC Bootcamps Evolution – Singapore, Samoa and Seychelles.

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Abstract

**I attended the last week of three Virtual University for Small States in the
Commonwealth (VUSSC) Bootcamps as the Commonwealth of Learning (COL)
representative and evaluator. Over the period of a year, I was able to observe
the evolution and changing dynamics of these workshops and gain some
understanding of what makes these a successful model in transmitting technical
skills, leadership and cross cultural understanding.**

Locations

- *Singapore March 2007.*
  An Asian city state on islands with a land area of 699 sq k at the base of the
  Malaysian peninsula. It's a country of 4.5 million people, with a skilled
  workforce, advanced and efficient infrastructure. It is the regional centre for
  financial and high technology in East Asia. The ordered and orderly society is
  predominately Chinese with substantial Malay and Indian communities. There
  are four official languages with English as the working language.

- *Samoa November 2007.*
  A Pacific nation that has retained the aspects of traditional society that it
  values and adopted what it wants from the west. The population is around
  180,000. Samoan is the main language but most people also speak English.
  Land area is 2,934 sq k over four islands with an economic zone of 120,000 sq
  k. Agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing and tourism are the main sources of
  income, together with remittances from family members living overseas.

- *Seychelles March 2008*
  Situated in the Indian Ocean, Seychelles has around 83,000 citizens who speak
  Creole, French and English. There are 115 islands with a total land area of
  455 sq k with an economic zone of 1.3 million sq k. Tourism, fisheries and
  off shore businesses registering there, are the main sources of income. There
  is a shortage of skilled labour due mainly to migration.

Structure of VUSSC Bootcamps

COL works with a host institution in a VUSSC member country to provide a suitable venue and support. This has to include a dedicated computer suite with internet access and on-site technical support to maintain this. VUSSC Interlocutors in each country are asked to nominate appropriate people, either subject or education experts. Depending on how many nominations are received, the remaining slots are filled with in country nominations to the maximum the computer suite can accommodate. COL selects 4-5 team leaders from the nominations and brings them to Vancouver for a weeks intensive training before the bootcamp. Accommodation and travel are arranged by COL Vancouver office, and in-country organisation including paying per diems by the host institution.

In the three bootcamps I attended, Paul West managed the first week and provided intensive training as required, Joshua Mallett facilitated the second week, and I managed and evaluated the final week. The host institutions – Nanyang Institute of Education (NIE) with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Singapore, National University of Samoa, and the Ministry of Education in Seychelles provided a dedicated person or team to manage the bootcamp, including the financial disbursements.

What makes VUSSC bootcamps unique

- Genuine control and autonomy by host country, including financial
- Genuine power for team leaders to manage their group and direct the learning outcomes
- Workshops (in the main) run in developing countries with the reality that brings – eg internet connectivity
- Commonwealth wide attendees rather than regional meetings with a mix of cultures, technical expertise and content knowledge.
- Attendees aren't excluded because their country currently has limited infrastructure to implement all opportunities offered by VUSSC.
- In-country interlocutors are accountable for selecting the right attendees, mentoring and monitoring what they achieve on their return home
- Production of usable learning material produced by people of vastly different skills and backgrounds in less than three weeks

Evolving Platforms

The Singapore workshop was based entirely on Wiki Educator. This is a hard programme to learn quickly, with a number of quirks that make it difficult for the unsophisticated or technically inept learner. In Samoa there was a mix of Wiki Educator and BaseCamp – the later was a lot easier to learn and participants were able to move to the course development phase considerably faster. Seychelles bootcamp worked almost entirely in Base Camp. In Singapore we were left with a considerable amount of work remaining to be done at the conclusion of the workshop, and while promises were made to continue to work on it back at home, the reality of work and life overcame good intentions. Both the Singapore and Seychelles groups got their

learning material to a good stage, all content identified and entered, with activities and assessment largely completed.

External Hard Drives

These were loaded with free software for participants, and were a huge advance for most of them on anything they have available at home. I'm most familiar with the Pacific where old computers with limited storage, limited access to expensive and slow internet, and unreliable electricity are the norm. Pacific participants at all the bootcamps have been delighted to have something that bridges the technological divide and enables them to participate. I'm told that the free software on these hard drives is being copied and used all over the Pacific.

Technical Support

Singapore provided considerable technical support, with staff from the technical Institute actively engaging in the workshop. There was also an external full-time technical expert who operated at a very high level. Participants divided into a small group of technically sophisticated participants who were able to keep up with the technical expert and relished the opportunity to operate at that level; the main group in the middle who largely helped each other, and a small group who were unable to keep up and felt intimidated by the level at which the technical expert operated. He in turn was frustrated by participants who were unable to understand him and told me COL should be insisting that only computer programmers to attend the workshops.

In Samoa there was an external technical support person who was used to operating in a developing country and taking people from where they were, to a higher level of understanding and competence. His interpersonal skills made him a popular and welcome member of the group, mixing easily with everyone he met. In addition to supporting the participants, he ran workshops for staff from the Samoan MOE and curriculum development unit who had had a low level of understanding of what could be achieved with access to computer and internet skills. His work made a significant impact. There was also a volunteer from Otago Polytechnic in NZ, who was in Samoa to evaluate the skills of veterinary nurses to RPL them for units in the NZ qualification. He has an interest in the work that COL is doing in the region, and volunteered to attend the bootcamp. His instructional design skills and unobtrusive way of working were appreciated by the group, which continued in the months following the bootcamp when he edited the final material. NUS also provided good technical back-up and expertise.

In Seychelles there wasn't an external technical expert for the full three weeks as the intended person became ill at the last moment. Paul West provided technical training and support in the first week, and the host institution provided technical backup for the rest of the bootcamp. While the bootcamp could have benefited by having someone there full time, it was largely unnecessary. The participants appeared to have better technical skills than previous bootcamps, with less of a "tail". There were good technical and teaching skills within the group, and a lot of helping each other to

learn. This extended outside the set hours, and was empowering to both learners and instructors.

Leadership

The opportunity to lead their groups was welcomed by most of those selected and as the bootcamps evolved, so did the training and deployment of team leaders. The model that has been developed where people are given pre-training before the bootcamps and then given real responsibility to manage their teams is very successful – and on many levels. Over the year teams became more important in how the bootcamp ran, and the leaders more confident. I saw some outstanding leaders who not only ensured the work got done, but coached team members in technical skills and looked after their health and well being.

Social/cultural

The organising institutions and their governments were keen to demonstrate their ability to provide suitable venues and showcase their cultures. The Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs organised a number of social events including visits to the zoo, a tour of the city, and a spectacular lunch offering food from many regions. In Samoa the participants were formally greeted with a traditional kava ceremony, taken to local beaches and climbed the mountain to R.L. Stevenson's tomb. Local participants took them to their homes and churches. In Seychelles the Ministry of Education sponsored a cultural evening with high energy local dancing, but the highlight was a trip to Praslin and La Digue, – two off shore islands about an hours sailing from Victoria which have a World Heritage Park with gigantic palms and huge turtles. For a number of participants this was their first trip in a boat and very exciting.

There were opportunities at all bootcamps for participants to explore the local cultures, social life and shopping. In Singapore we were astounded by the range of technical goods available and most participants took the opportunity to acquire or upgrade computer and camera equipment. In Samoa the local Polynesian hospitality bound the group into a coherent unit, which was evidenced when a participant became extremely ill and the group organised themselves so someone was with him at the hospital day and night. In Seychelles people from the island nations discovered that several of the other participants couldn't swim and were afraid of water. There was a "learn to swim" group organised at the hotel pool and most nights there were learners being coached.

Cross-cultural understanding

The Commonwealth is a very diverse collection of cultures and attitudes. Logistics and expense make it very rare for people to have the chance to work with people outside their region. Large gatherings such as PCF can be overwhelming and people often stay with colleagues from their regions rather than confront the differences in accent, attitude and way of doing things.

These bootcamps put participants together in small teams of people from diverse backgrounds. Perhaps even more important than the technical skills and resource creation, are the insights that this brings. Most participants mentioned this in their evaluations and one-on-one interviews, from the stress that this initially caused them to the new friendships they had made. Some confided they had regarded particular groups or religions in a negative way before the bootcamp, but found a common humanity when working with representatives of those groups.

People did things they had never done before, from travelling on a boat, to participating in a traditional kava ceremony. A small woman wearing her traditional head to toe clothing was helped to climb a mountain by her team. She not only got to the top but fell in the mud on the way down and washed herself and clothes in a stream. A guy from a land locked African country, learned to swim and went snorkelling in the lagoon to his huge delight.

People learned about each others families, religions, jobs, tribes, hopes, fears and aspirations. If the bootcamps achieved nothing else, this understanding would have been worth the effort and expenditure to get these groups together.

Conclusions

The model of learning developed for training people in the production of learning materials for VUSSC is successful on many levels. The organiser has shown considerable imagination and courage in conducting these bootcamps in predominantly developing countries, and giving an increasing measure of control and autonomy to the host institution and team leaders.

Participants have gained technical and learning content development skills, assisted by the provision of external hard drives loaded with free software. Useful learning resources have been produced and are available to all VUSSC members

Gaining an appreciation of the things that link us as well as those that divide us has been an important part of being a team member at a bootcamp.

VUSSC is rapidly providing trained people and useful learning resources to the Commonwealth. Those who envisaged VUSSC and the people who have implemented their dream have contributed a model of learning that should continue to evolve to meet the needs of small states.