



## Electronic reporting as a way of improving community knowledge about what goes on at school

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### Overview

Maningrida Community Education Centre is a large remote-area school for Indigenous students situated in Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory. In 2003, a community consultation was commissioned by the school in an attempt to find out how to strengthen the dialogue between school and community. An analysis of the results of the consultation suggested that the school needed to try new ways of engaging with the community about school business. The topic of this paper, electronic reporting, has become part of the larger plan to improve the dialogue between the school and community. Electronic reporting has proven to be a meaningful and enjoyable way of interacting with community, students and other teachers about school. In conjunction with other multi-media, electronic reporting has greatly improved community understanding of what goes on at school.

### What is electronic reporting?

Electronic reporting is the compilation of a PowerPoint™ presentation of each student's work that can include writing samples, recorded speech, pictures, charts, videos and any other scanned samples of work. The presentation takes the place of a paper report and is best presented on a computer or as a Light Pro presentation. Parents can be given a CD containing the report if they have a computer, or a paper copy. As most

homes have a DVD player at Maningrida, all parents will be given a DVD copy of their child's report for the first time at the end of this year.

### The physical context of Maningrida

Approximately 1,800 people live in Maningrida speaking 17 Indigenous languages. The community is situated about 500 kilometres east of Darwin on the Liverpool River. Daily flights allow people to travel to Darwin relatively easily and it is possible to drive to Darwin in the dry season (an eight-hour drive passing through Kakadu National Park).

There are 15 Homeland Centres in and around Maningrida. The school provides educational services to 13 of these centres. Teachers fly or drive to Homeland Centres and generally spend 3 nights camping and working with an Indigenous assistant teacher to deliver educational programs for students from preschool to Year 12.

The Hub school provides programs in 3 languages, Ndjébbana, Burarra and English for students from Preschool to Year 12. Ndjébbana was chosen because it is the language of the Kunividji people, the landowners of Maningrida, and Burarra because the speakers of this language are the largest group numerically. English programs are provided for students from English-speaking backgrounds.

The community at Maningrida is traditionally oriented with ceremony remaining strong throughout the year, and especially in the dry season. The school is often invited to run a program at a ceremony site during the day. We consider ceremony to be a major part of our two-way program.

### **The school and the community**

Most teachers recognise that they need the support of parents and the community in general in order for students to be successful at school. Over many years Maningrida teachers have tried a variety of ways of forming partnerships with the community and of informing them about what happens at school. These include: visiting students' and families in their homes; including parents in excursions both local and beyond; inviting parents to Cultural Days, Open Nights and other special events; inviting the entire community to large events, barbeques, and days out; welcoming parents in classrooms throughout the school; and broadcasting video and slideshows about school into people's homes via the school's own TV station.

Parents and community members sit on School Council and the ASSPA Committee, and are encouraged to attend or call meetings about school issues. The school employs over 50 Indigenous people in various capacities including two senior teacher positions, and supports the training of Indigenous staff members. Despite these efforts, a community meeting indicated that we had not achieved the necessary levels of understanding, and commitment to our school by the community. An extensive community consultation carried out in 2003 has impacted our approach to reaching out to the community in general. The role of electronic reporting in this plan was somewhat coincidental.

### **The background to reporting**

Teachers at Maningrida have often expressed their discomfort in presenting written reports to parents whose own literacy may mean they cannot access the information they contain. Teachers have tried other means of reporting, such as pictorially or personal visits, but still felt that the message about what goes on at school, what impacts success at school, and student achievement was not getting across in any meaningful way. Teachers' main concerns about the message were that parents did not understand the nature or extent of activities the kids were actually involved in at school. They actually thought our curriculum was not as comprehensive as Darwin schools. Teachers always reported that kids were doing really well – and this is true within the context of Maningrida – but not so in the broader context of mainstream education. During the consultation, parents asked how their kids were doing in comparison to town kids. Parents did not seem to feel comfortable talking to teachers about school. They did not seem to know what sort of questions to ask, and so the teacher did all the talking. Reporting was not a positive or meaningful experience for parents, kids or teachers. Teachers were never sure about the language of the reports – did they provide information to address the needs of parents, or for other teachers.

In 2003, Maningrida CEC received funding for an IT project in the school. The principal at that time had seen electronic reporting at another school and thought that it provided answers to many of the concerns expressed above. The principal also saw how electronic reporting could address at least one of the issues raised in the consultation – that of school going into the community instead of a strong reliance on community coming into the school. We were at that time unaware of the other benefits that

electronic reporting would present over time.

**What are the other benefits of electronic reporting?**

Electronic reports allow parents to actually hear and see what sort of activities their kids are involved in at school. (This is expanded upon through our BRACS program - our own TV station that allows us to broadcast slideshows and videos of school activities out into the community). We rely a great deal on the old adage that a picture is worth a thousand words.

Electronic reports allows us to pictorially represent each kid's personal progress at school and how they are doing at school in relation to mainstream kids. Electronic reporting allows kids to be involved in the construction of their own reports. Kids not only have input into their portfolios but are involved in a process that helps them to better understand and articulate to parents what school is all about.

Electronic reporting provides teachers and parents with something to talk about and takes the focus off parents being talked at. Electronic reports tended to be a very positive experience for all with lots of laughter and surprise.

After much experimentation, electronic reports allow us to provide information about school more efficiently and appropriately to both parents and teachers. Teachers have little trouble deciding if they would like to browse a single CD containing the reports of their entire class or to browse through a filing cabinet of record folders.

Teachers have been called on to develop very extensive skills with a variety of information technology. Electronic reports require skills and knowledge of digital cameras and videos, scanners,

Light Pros, CD and DVD burners, the school's server, and all associated software. This in turn has allowed teachers to feel more confident about passing on these same skills to kids.

**The process and how we have become smarter**

We trialled electronic reporting in the primary area in 2003 in one class. Overall the teacher reported a very positive response from parents, but our next Open Night was the true measure of how electronic reports had impacted the community's attitude to school. We had twice the number of parents attending class that had been 'electronic reported' before the Open Night. It was also quite obvious that parents who had been visited and shown an electronic report felt more comfortable about going into a classroom. Many of these parents brought along other family members and asked to see the reports again. We were delighted with these results. At the end of 2003 we trialled the whole of primary delivering reports with generally poor IT skills, and only 3 laptops and 4 cars between 15 teachers.

In 2004, teachers felt a little more confident about their computer skills and after discussion had worked out how to view electronic reporting using the same analogy as desktop publishing. The collecting and storing of samples of work can be done electronically and electronic reports allow for the compilation of reports to begin at the start of the school year. Teachers viewed electronic reports as folders in which they stored kids' work samples and profiled those samples as they were entered. This proved to be far more efficient than traditional folders. Most of the tools teachers needed were in the classroom in a format that was very appealing to kids - computers, microphones and cameras - so kids could also be involved in the compilation of the electronic portfolios. We trialled a buddy

system – a teacher with strong IT skills was buddied to a teacher with lesser skills. In 2004, we had very few new teachers so it was only a matter of refining the process. Some senior teachers had created proformas for reports and, by the end of the year, all teachers had been issued with laptops by DEET. In the final term of 2004, we trialled a whole-school approach to reporting to parents using electronic portfolios.

### **The glitches**

In mid 2004 there was some frustration expressed by teachers in the delivery of reports to community. One teacher wrote a report about the delivery of reports, relating lack of extension cords, the impossibility of 20 adults viewing one laptop, families not being home, dogs walking over computers, and the problems of delivering large numbers of reports to homes with many kids attending school. The teacher related the incidents in a light-hearted way, and in general the euphoria of teachers about the successes of electronic reporting somewhat masked these concerns. It was not until the end of 2004 that it was obvious that some of these issues needed to be addressed.

At the start of 2005, teachers were asked to comment on what they thought could improve electronic reporting. The response was generally that teachers preferred making electronic reports to laboriously writing reports. The process was enjoyable because it was creative and the kids loved being involved in choosing what to show their parents. Teachers also felt that parents were really getting a good picture of what their kids were doing at school but there was again the occasional comment about some of the problems of going out to the community to deliver reports. This was somewhat shocking as going out into the community was meant to be one of the greatest benefits in the whole process. Teachers

explained that it was fine when just the primary section had gone out to present reports to community in 2003. But, one teacher asked, 'Imagine yourself as a family with eight or, even 10, kids living in Maningrida and its report time!'

She noted that she had actually seen parents hide as the 10th grinning teacher, full of enthusiasm, came over the hill armed with laptop and a great desire to show and talk through a very comprehensive report. It was taking up to 45 minutes for each report to be shown and, if a picture is worth a thousand words, why did teachers still feel they needed to talk so much?

### **The future**

After discussion, a very reasonable alternative has been put into place. Open Nights will be advertised over our TV station, in our community magazine, and with posters around town. Each classroom has at least seven computers available. Parents with their kids can come into classrooms and view reports, and teachers will offer support when and where it is appropriate. Some teachers would still like to go out into the community and we feel that is good advertising. Some parents may request a visit and we would also be very happy to accommodate such requests. Homeland teachers feel very comfortable reporting directly to parents as they live in the smaller communities and tend to spend time at night with parents any way. This is the approach that will be put in place over the next few weeks at Maningrida.

### **What are the main benefits of electronic reporting?**

In summary, we feel that electronic reports are giving parents a better and more accessible picture of what goes on at school, and of their own child's progress. This has allowed parents to engage with teachers about school, to ask questions and make suggestions. Electronic reports

allow kids to be part of the process of reporting to parents so making reporting a more positive and meaningful experience for most of them. Electronic reports are also providing teachers with a more efficient way of compiling and providing relevant information to both teachers and parents. The up-skilling of teachers in terms of their knowledge and confidence with many forms of technology has increased their ability to pass this knowledge on to kids in the classroom. Overall electronic reporting has proven to be the most effective means so far of keeping everyone informed about school at Maningrida.