

Case Study 1: (Re) - Introducing LAMS to Indigenous Learners

A discussion with Sam Altman and Angela Voerman from Warawara, the Indigenous Support Unit at Macquarie University

Angela Voerman and Sam Altman have been using LAMS for two years. They joined the trial at Macquarie in 2004 and were keen to use LAMS again in 2005. Both Sam and Angela teach in the Community Management degree/diploma program for Indigenous students. Angela coordinates the Year 1 Sociology unit *Understanding Organisations* and *Research Methods and Applications* for Year 3. Sam teaches the Year 3 Management unit *Managing People* and coordinates the program as a whole.

Sam and Angela initially decided to use LAMS as they had attempted in the past to introduce technology into the Diploma program, but found access issues for students between the residential periods on campus too difficult to resolve. Also, they weren't convinced that using WebCT during the on-campus sessions would meet their needs. However, LAMS appealed because of its ease of use and collaborative potential, and 'this is the way we work together' Angela commented.

I asked Sam and Angela how they felt about using LAMS the second time. While Angela edited and amended her sequences for this second offering, Sam reused the two sequences exactly as they were. He wanted the students to collaborate in constructing questions for a survey instrument which students' could then take back with them to their own work places later on. The topic was occupational health and safety. Students focused on the issue of 'emotional labour' and how Indigenous workers and managers can provide support for their communities, while at the same time preserving space for their own private lives separate from their employment – a difficult task in a community setting. Sam's observation of the 'LAMS class' this time was that while students once again shared experience of the workplace readily with each other, within LAMS sessions and otherwise, the critique of fellow students' contributions – using the LAMS forum - had much more depth. Students took time to make suggestions about the proposed survey questions, reword questions and offer new ideas for the final list of survey questions. The outcome was a substantial contribution to a useful survey instrument. Forty per cent of the assessment is allocated for participation in this course, and part of that mark was for contributing to LAMS, so it was in the students' interests to engage with LAMS. 'But the students enjoyed it very much' Sam said. 'They went on for hours working on the task.' He added that 'The benefits of using LAMS will be evident (or not) in the next assignment. The students have to come up with five resources and evaluate each. So the quality of their writing will in part be due to how well the sessions went during the block on campus.'

Enjoyment and engagement in the blended classroom experience using LAMS was evident in Angela's classes as well. 'We began with a chat session, where they were talking about the meaning of "Community Management". They chat on lots, typing in things and talking across the classroom... Using LAMS has shown me that it all takes

longer to process ideas than you think. But when you look back at the chat there's so much good stuff in there.' Angela went on to say that the students became 'energised' through the discussion – an important outcome, as teaching and learning in the 10 day block on-campus sessions is a real challenge: student interest and enthusiasm has to be maintained over an intense period of study.

This year Angela added a new sequence, making three in all to be attempted in the September on-campus session. The students have also been given access to LAMS while they are studying at home after the block, so they can complete or refer back to the sequences and their responses.

Angela used LAMS in several ways: for debriefing after a simulated Land Council meeting; to help students engage more deeply with selected prescribed readings; and to develop students' research skills in relation to the Library electronic (e)-reserve repository.

In terms of quality of outcomes, student responses to the debrief in LAMS following the simulated meeting and role play impressed Angela. In past years students have debriefed face-to-face in class, but by using LAMS she has been able to hear (or read) what all students thought about the experience, and there is more tangible evidence (recorded in the Forum and Q&A tools in LAMS) of the students integrating experience and theory. These written contributions can be revisited when students are ready to write up the experience in a subsequent formal piece of assessable writing.

In the e-reserve activity, Angela used the Question and Answer (Q&A) tool to first revise content from lectures and readings on community management; she then used the Share Resources tool to introduce the Library online e-reserve section, using the instruction box option displayed above the web page in LAMS to guide students into e-reserve, and to get them to log in and locate course readings. She then used Forums and more Q&A to engage students in discussion about a specific reading they had downloaded, all the while scaffolding process and improving critical reading skills. Angela said that student responses to this task were positive as it is often difficult to get them into the readings. There was a problem with one of the functions of the e-reserve facility, however, when accessed from inside LAMS which seemed to limit some processes.

I asked Sam and Angela if they experienced any other difficulties second time around – either technical, logistical or pedagogical. Sam indicated he had troubles with the naming of sequences. By mistake he ended up running two sequences concurrently with the same name, so the class was unintentionally split: half the class entered one sequence, the other half joined the other. They resolved this with much in-class discussion, with students volunteering to collate the relevant data for the group. Angela had problems with her first sequence - perhaps because it was based on an early version of the LAMS software. As the sequence was completed students progressively lost the ability to add comments to the Forum. In another sequence the cut and paste function for sharing URLs in the Share Resources tool did not operate. In both cases it was possible to work around these tasks and complete the work face to face, or use what work had already been contributed.

Angela and Sam intend to use LAMS again next year and expect to use it as a means of maintaining contact with students between on-campus sessions, and encouraging students to spend more time on task when they are away from the University. LAMS will also be integrated into most of the 22 units that make up the new Bachelor in Community Management (BCM) over the next three years. They said that based on their experience trialing LAMS in the Diploma units in 2004 and 2005, they are recommending that all degree units in the BCM use LAMS because:

1. *“The BCM needs an educationally robust online system able to effectively deliver unit teaching and learning strategies to students both on-campus and between blocks.*
2. *LAMS provides a user-friendly collaborative interface particularly well-suited to BCM students; and*
3. *LAMS sequences provide a sustainable teaching model that is easy for new staff to learn and adapt. This is particularly important for the BCM which has a heavy reliance on casual lecturers, both from inside and outside the University.”*

*Robyn Philip
Macquarie E-Learning Centre of Excellence (MELCOE)
November 2005*