

VIRTUAL GATEWAY, REAL CHALLENGE

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Web 2.0, Internet and other stuff,

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I'm thrilled to be invited to speak here today, not because I love public speaking, because I *really* don't, but because it gives me an opportunity to showcase something Wyndham Library Service has developed.

Wyndham Library services one of the fastest growing municipalities in Australia. Wyndham's population in 2006 was estimated to be 121,000 and is expected to reach over 205,000 by 2020. We have about five new families moving into the municipality each day. Keeping up with this growth in terms of increased demand for programs, facilities and services has been challenging - to have been able to create something that initiates rather than responds to change has been rewarding.

So, today I am delighted to tell you about our learning portal, **wynlearn**. Wynlearn is a web site designed to bring together information about local learning opportunities. It provides information about learning events and programs held in the local area and has a directory of host organisations. It's ultimate aim is to increase awareness of, and participation in, lifelong learning among the residents of Wyndham.

In this presentation I will discuss:

- The thinking behind it
- The process of developing it
- How it works
- The outcomes to date
- Future challenges

The thinking behind it

The inspiration and impetus for **wynlearn** came from a series of strategic plans that seek to foster and develop lifelong learning in Wyndham.

The **Wyndham Quality Community Plan** (or QCP) is a community plan based on the input of over 2000 local residents. The community vision for Education and skills development is that Wyndham will be a place of continuous learning through life, improving residents' employability, and also enhancing their quality of life. Formal and informal learning opportunities will be available to all age groups and to people of all income levels.

The **Wyndham Community Learning Strategy 2005-2008**, identified that compared to the rest of Melbourne, Wyndham residents **leave school earlier** and have **less tertiary qualifications**. They also engage less often in Adult and Community Education compared to other Western Region Councils. The Learning Strategy noted that information about learning opportunities and courses in Wyndham was produced and distributed in an ad hoc manner.

Wyndham currently has two libraries and 11 Community Centres. These centres offer a range of services for children, life skills and craft courses. Werribee Community Centre also provides employment-based training.

The **Wyndham Library Service Strategic Plan 2005-2020** recognized the importance of lifelong learning, and the need to develop partnerships to improve learning outcomes. The strategy adopted a community learning centre model where future libraries and community centres will be co-located, to facilitate additional technology access and learning space. Combined libraries and community centres are planned for the suburbs of Point Cook, Wyndham Vale and Tarneit.

The development of the portal was instigated, and informed, by these three strategies. As a library service our expertise lay in organizing and disseminating information. The Community Centres provided the majority of community learning opportunities. The development of the portal provided a way for Library Services and Community Centres to begin working together, not just in a physical location, but in a virtual space.

Our aims were:

- To provide a single virtual focal point for libraries and learning in Wyndham
- To increase knowledge of, and accessibility to learning opportunities
- To increase participation in learning opportunities
- To facilitate connectedness amongst libraries, learning providers and learners
- To invite community dialogue about learning in Wyndham.

The process of developing it (or turning an idea into reality)

The majority of funding for the Portal has come through the Libraries Building Communities Demonstration grants program. Wyndham City Council has provided all of the staff support for project management and content design, and has committed to funding a part-time position to maintain the Portal now the project has been launched.

The initial project plan was developed in conjunction with Vicnet. It identified key milestones and a detailed timeline. The team at Vicnet have undertaken wynlearn's construction and now host the portal.

Communicating with the key stakeholders has been a priority. Introductory presentations were given to Councillors, senior management at Council, Community Centre Presidents and members of the Wyndham QCP Education Committee (a committee overseeing the education and skills development vision of the Quality Community Plan). Their ongoing support is crucial to the success of our project and we have continued to report back to them as the project has progressed.

To date our partners in the project include:

- Vicnet
- Wyndham City Council
- Library Board of the State Library Victoria
- 11 Community Centres
- Wyndham Volunteers Network
- Wyndham Connected (a business/community initiative to bring life skills to the community)
- Wyndham QCP Education Committee.

The majority of the workload involved building the portal. This was not an off the shelf design that we populated with information. The portal was built from the ground up. Rather than buying a display home where we just needed to decide on the carpet and tiles, we were building our house brick by brick!

The design process began with staff from Wyndham Library Service working with Community Centre coordinators to develop the structure of the Portal database. Coordinators were sent a questionnaire so that current information technology capabilities and enrolment practices could be taken into account.

Face to face meetings were then used to develop ideas and confirm current and future functionality requirements. Ideas included providing maps for learning locations, ensuring that the site is useable for learners with special requirements (i.e. language, literacy) and using a thesaurus for course subject allocation. This information was fed back to the team at Vicnet, who then had to build that particular functionality into a test database.

Further ideas for functionality were gained by benchmarking against Australian and international learning websites. The promotion of lifelong learning is a worldwide phenomenon and many excellent websites were found.

Of particular influence were:

- EDNA (www.edna.edu.au), Australia's free online network for educators.
- Short Courses Victoria (<http://www.shortcourses.vic.gov.au>)
- Hotcourses (United Kingdom) (<http://www.hotcourses.com>).

A major premise of the site is that course providers enter their own information. Different login levels were created so that Community Centre Managers could enter course information, and teachers could create forums for their students. Vicnet provided training for all key staff and learning providers so that our partners have the required skills to enter their data. The skill levels and confidence of this group varies widely, so ongoing support and encouragement will be essential.

In response to coordinator feedback, the Portal has been designed so that at a future stage it will be able to accept bookings and export users data in the format required to apply for accredited courses. In addition, support for languages other than English is being considered for future phases of the project.

HOW IT WORKS

I would now like to give you a brief demonstration of the website. The look and feel of the website was carefully chosen to reflect partnership goals. The images for the portal were taken at local community centres. Wording from the Quality Community Plan was used to enliven the images.

A conscious decision was made to make the language of the website active with terms such as find, engage, and connect. Mouseovers explain each area in detail.

Find learning

Find learning helps you to search courses and learning activities in the Wyndham area. When searching, you can just enter a keyword, or you can search by time of day, or by your favourite learning provider. You can also search for learning providers such as community centres via a Wyndham map.

Engage in learning

Wynlearn members can access a wide range of information about adult education via the "Explore" link. The "Connect" link allows members to exchange ideas and post messages in the wynlearn forum. The forum will be used to feedback information to learning providers and decision makers. Future marketing will target this area as users have been slow to take up this opportunity. Members can also subscribe to RSS feeds including news and announcements provided by the site.

My wynlearn

To register their interest in learning events, residents need to be a wynlearn member. Once registration is complete, residents can login to access the complete range of services available through wynlearn.

The portal is dynamic and interactive. It has significant Web 2.0 features including:

1. Personalisation

- Saved searches
- Tailored RSS news content. (This was created using Yahoo! Pipes - an interactive feed aggregator and manipulator)

2. Social software elements

The Forum allows residents to raise new learning opportunities and discuss existing learning locally.

3. Content Syndication

Alerts are sent to members when new learning events are entered that match saved search criteria.

As you can see, we have tried to create much more than a database. **wynlearn** provides the opportunity for residents and learning partners to actively engage in learning.

So what are the outcomes to date?

The Portal was launched on May 16 by the Honorable John Cain.

The site is currently delivering an average 75 visits per day. There are 81 registered users (to date), who can register their interest in over 200 different events currently available through the web site.

The site receives traffic from the Wyndham City Council, Victoria's Virtual Library, Vicnet and via search engines. Local community related keywords such as community centre names feature in keyword traffic, suggesting that the site is providing a portal to community learning providers (almost half of keywords relate to community centres). The traffic is almost entirely Australian, which is in line with the site's intention to provide locally relevant content.

The Challenges ahead

Our challenge now is to grow and develop **wynlearn** in a way that is practical and sustainable. We need to:

1. Expand the number of learning opportunities listed. Community centres have given us an initial platform. There are many more community learning providers we have yet to approach such as schools, universities and training organisations.

2. Develop a user manual that clearly outlines portal protocols for our learning providers. (For example one of our community centres listed their Saturday market as a learning event).
3. Ensure the learning providers are updating the content in a timely manner.
4. Encourage the community to participate in an online dialogue about learning that can be used to inform learning providers.
5. Keep marketing the portal in innovative ways to increase usage
6. Continue developing the functionality of the portal in line with community needs and expectations.

Before I finish I would like to acknowledge the efforts of our systems librarian Tom Edwards, and Richard Hayward and the Vicnet Team. Tom has championed the project and has been the source of many of the creative design ideas. Vicnet's experience in building community based websites has been invaluable. They have also demonstrated a great capacity to entertain new ideas, tolerate changes of mind, although I think their patience may have been tested when we were choosing the portal colours!

Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the **wynlearn** logo. The logo is taken from a sculpture located at the entrance to our municipality called the "seeds of change". I hope with our portal we have planted the seeds of change for improved community learning outcomes in Wyndham.

I would like to leave you with a thought on this day when we are looking at ways of moving into the future. It is attributed to the Roman poet Ovid who was born around the same time as Christ.

*There's nothing constant in the world,
All ebb and flow, and every shape that's born
Bears in its womb the seeds of change.*

Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso) (43 B.C.–A.D. 17/18), Roman poet