

Commentary: Reflections On Developing A Research Group

Ross Harvey and Tony Dean with members of ReCITE

Introduction

The Research Centre for Innovation and Telelearning Environments (ReCITE) was formed in 2001 at Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga campus. It is comprised principally of members who work in three different 'departments' – information technology, teacher librarianship and library, and information science - of the School of Information Studies. In 2002 it was forced to undergo a name change, because the word 'centre' is reserved, by CSU, to refer to specific research groupings. The name now stands for 'Research, Consultancy in Telelearning Environments' – the acronym remains unchanged. To date, it has hosted visits by Tony Bates (University of British Columbia) and a delegation from the European Commission, led by Betty Collis and Martin Valcke, whose purpose was to examine Australian ways of approaching distance education using ICT.

The current journal papers are the first to be attempted, en masse, by the ReCITE group. This edition arose from a meeting about October 2001 when Tony Dean suggested 'commandeering' a journal by approaching its editor with the suggestion that ReCITE be the sole contributors to a thematic issue. *eJIST* was approached and Ian Mitchell, in his new role as Executive Editor of e-JIST, was given the task of deciding whether this idea was to go forward. Both Ian and his advisory panel were positively disposed and the result is the issue of the *eJIST* journal that you are now reading. To the best of our knowledge, or that of the editor, this approach has no precedent.

Having gone through the process of readying ourselves for a group publication, what have we learned? To that discussion we now turn.

Reflections

In the spirit of being reflective practitioners, members of ReCITE took the opportunity suggested by the Editor of *eJIST* to reflect on the experience of trying to write collaboratively and juxtapositionally. ReCITE is a newly-emerging research group whose members come to the group with a wide range of research experience and disciplinary background, and the comments reflect this.

Seven questions were emailed to all ReCITE members, that is, those who prepared papers for this issue of *eJIST* as well as those who did not, and those who promised papers but later withdrew. The response rate was about 30 percent.

1. What did you see as valuable in the e-JIST process?

The two aspects considered to be most valuable in the process were (not unexpectedly) the further development of a research group ethos for ReCITE, and the opportunities it offered for collaboration and constructive criticism. This process provided 'the chance to bring the group together, to realise some synergies, to finally put pen to paper and to see what the other members

could do in view of the ReCITE purpose'. It provided opportunities to 'define ReCITE' and also to 'fly the ReCITE flag and thus alert people in the research community to our existence'. The constructive aspects of peer reviewing were noted, and linked to this was the possibility of collaboration, both currently (the 'potential to build a solid body of work by collaboration' even if it 'didn't quite work because too many reneged at the last minute') and in the future (as in the 'opportunity to discuss aspects of our work with each other with a possible consequence of collaboration later on'). One member noted particularly that the process resulted in more relevant collaboration: 'first time I have ever been given a reference by a colleague which I was able to read and make use of in my paper - I sometimes get info from colleagues but it is out of sync with my needs so it tends to be wasted'.

Members of the group who were newer to research and publication found the process useful because it provided a deadline, and because of the opportunity it provided to write a position paper.

2. What was the primary motivation for your involvement?

Consensus in the answers to this question was found only in one aspect, to 'produce something that ReCITE could point to as an outcome of the work of the group'. The outcome would produce benefits to the Group 'from being refereed, both by peers and external reviewers ... DEST points and the research/pub quantum ... the economics of it all.'

One participant had a more personal motive: their on-going involvement with the group had led them to question their involvement in the Group, and this process 'was a test in some ways to see who would perform'. Another bluntly answered this question with the single word 'publication'. Another, a doctoral candidate, felt 'that tackling something new is part of the learning curve' and 'thought it would be a worthwhile experience even if the paper did not get accepted'.

3. If you didn't contribute, explain the factors which prevailed.

Academic workloads was cited most frequently, for example, 'I think I am drowning ... represent a thrashing cpu' and 'the work pressures in Spring/Summer got the better of me'. One member, a newly appointed academic, was an interested observer but did not contribute because 'I didn't feel I had the background to write a quality paper, while getting my head around my new job.'

4. Any suggestions (post facto) to improve the process if we were to do this again?

The responses to this area provide clear evidence that ReCITE members found the experience useful and would consider trying it again, although with significant changes to the process. Changes suggested were:

(i) *Spend more time on developing a focus and indicating expectations.* 'I think we attempted to find an appropriate focus that we could all fit in to, but when this wasn't possible we instead chose an overly broad theme. As a result we ended up with quite disparate papers that didn't lend themselves to cross-linking'. One member suggested that make clearer 'just what was expected, who the intended audience was and the amount of detail/explanation expected'.

(ii) *Earlier feedback.* Perhaps what was required was 'an early show and tell/brainstorming session where each author outlines some of the main ideas and receives feedback from the group and 'takes on a co-author if sufficient interest is expressed'.

(iii) *Better 'wrangling', more face-to-face sessions.* A more clearly defined time line, combined with 'more frequent checks to keep people on track and avoid the pull out at the end' and with 'frequent face to face progress sessions ... it's too easy to avoid the e-mail'.

(iv) *Co-authorship.* A greater number of co-authored papers would involve 'some of those who may have been reluctant to put up a complete paper on their own' and assist newer researchers to publish.

5. Do you think the e-JIST project has furthered the sense of ReCITE as a research group? Why? Why not?

The answers to this question were a definite 'yes', although with some qualifications. For those directly involved, it was considered to have 'a very positive impact'. For those on the sidelines it was also significant in that 'it showed that something concrete and substantial CAN be produced. One small step...' Peer support and a collaborative review process were specifically noted and further amplified: 'the activity of reviewing each other's papers was one of the few local activities that we have undertaken that was focused on research rather than the administration of the group. More activities like this would be stimulating and would be likely to lead to further collaborations down the track.'

A more qualified statement ('the answer is possibly 'yes'') suggested that the experience could lead to 'a more realistic realisation of what it takes to get such a group up and running (and thereby some more direct commitment)' but it might also lead to 'a fizzle-away-and-die situation because it is all too hard'. For one respondent the jury was not yet in: 'it will be interesting to see what effects actual publication and subsequent reader input has on authors and the group.' For another, 'these types of exercises should be attempted ... if ReCITE is to prove a useful vehicle for academic development - and then the lessons learned'.

6. Is this project a possible indication of worthwhile future exercises with the same or other journals? Explain please.

The responses were typically qualified. One indicated yes, but with a different topic – reporting on actual research on different aspects of a theme, rather than finding a theme that encompasses what different individuals do'. Another indicated yes, depending on workload. The most enthusiastic response considered this 'as a worthwhile exercise for ReCITE members to pool their writings, find a worthwhile journal willing and ready to publish, self-referee, publicise the group'.

However, others considered that 'it could go either way. One member indicated that 'those who 'did it' may seek further work together.' Two responses were along these lines: 'I know I can be more prolific working in isolation and that always looms as a prospect now that I've seen the group perform in the way it did.'

7. What single feature/fact was most beneficial to you as an individual?

Despite some doubt about whether this exercise had collective benefits for the Group, the positive benefits to individuals were definitely indicated. Publication was specifically noted, as were the benefits of participating in the peer review process such as 'making one more aware of the need for clarity and precision', and 'getting feedback from people not conversant with my research field' (although journal editors got a serve: 'having paper read by other researchers, rather than editors of more generalist journals'). The 'sense of collaboration/ sharing/ working towards a common goal' was noted. There was an element of scrutiny of others in the Group: one respondent noted the 'opportunity to watch the process unfold and thereby see who would stand up to be counted', and another that they considered beneficial the opportunity to see 'that it is poor form to commit to something, then pull out late. You either say no – or fulfil your commitment.'

Conclusion

Coming clearly through these comment are three themes:

- There were clear benefits both to ReCITE and to the individuals who participated
- If the process is to be repeated, it needs to be handled differently
- There was a degree of scepticism about whether the process engaged sufficient members of ReCITE to warrant repeating it.

This reflection process has itself proved useful. Without the call for comments by email there would probably not have been the clear indication of how to improve the process next time round.

The value to ReCITE of this process will be apparent from these reflections. One actual outcome is discussion and some preliminary work towards a collection of edited papers in collaboration with another research group in the same area. What is less clear is the value to the editors of *eJIST*. Was this, in the end, a frustrating process because ReCITE did not deliver the number of papers initially promised?

A comment from perhaps the most skeptical member of ReCITE is perhaps a fitting end to this reflective process: 'In spite of my critical comments ... we have achieved something that is I believe to be seen as meritorious and innovative.'

In the longer term the reflective process will be further informed by critical reader input. The *eJIST* editor has indicated a desire to use the electronic format of the journal to enable readers to make comment, which is then to be linked to the papers (or the issue) so that the archived edition will include post-publication commentary. Only when that process has been completed will the reality of what we have attempted to achieve be able to be fully scrutinised.