

Where to next? – A new direction for the oz-TeacherNet

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The *oz-TeacherNet* (OTN) is a virtual space which has been “live” since 1995. It is voluntarily managed by a small group of academics, mostly from the Queensland University of Technology, which is now called *oz-teachers*. This group was until recently the RITE Group (Research in Information Technology in Education).

The oz-Teachernet has been working with and for teachers since 1995. It is a non-profit community service which, up until January 2007, has been managed and maintained by academics at the Queensland University of Technology. We believe it to be the longest running community of its kind in the world, and certainly within the Asia-Pacific region. Our professional discussion lists currently have a membership of around 1500 people, mostly from within Australia, who are educators and education system leaders. Our online curriculum projects offer essential national and international networks to teachers and students which do not restrict collaboration to being within system or specific geographic boundaries. More recently, we have become involved in research partnerships with schools and have been particularly effective in providing educators with the mechanism to conduct collaborative research.

As we enter our twelfth year of operation, we are launching a revamped website and new domain [<http://www.oz-teachernet.edu.au>]. It will be the portal to our new and existing projects and professional discussion lists, all of which are based on open source principles and software. The environment we have created remains secure despite its sitting outside of system firewalls, a feature which enables broader connections for those involved in our communities. The new site mirrors our commitment to work with educators, including pre-service teachers, and to increase community input into our activities. Our new logo, designed by Jenny Masters, is shown in Figure 1.

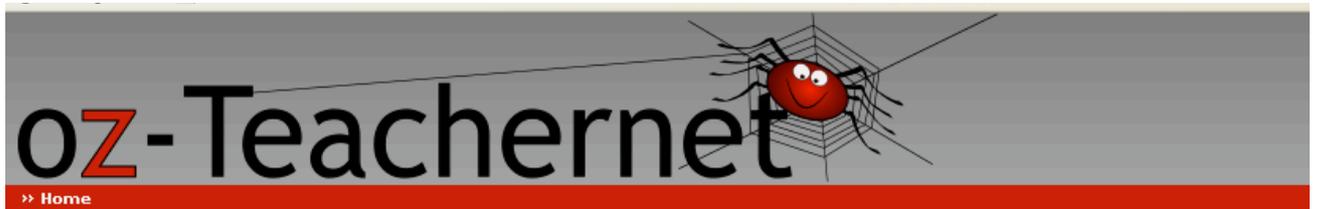


Figure 1: 2007 logo

The oz-TeacherNet is now managed by a different set of people from those who initially formed the RITE Group in 1991-92. But, despite individuals retiring, resigning or moving on to other projects, the passion and motivation for the work has continued. There is an axe in a museum in New Zealand which is said to have belonged to the Maori chieftain, Hone Heke. This axe is still regarded as being Hone Heke's despite having had several handle and blade replacements. We like to think that the oz-teachers of 2007 is similar (in spirit and action) to the RITE Group of 1992 - despite its comprising of different people and taking on a markedly different appearance. What continues, despite these changes in personnel, profile, technology and funding, is the essence, here not of the interchangeable components of the axe, but of the need to support teachers in working online in meaningful ways. The motto of the oz-TeacherNet was “teachers helping teachers” and this has not changed.

In 2007, as the oz-TeacherNet reaches a metaphorical adolescence, it is on the move, both virtually and conceptually, and the intent of this paper is to explain where it is going while acknowledging where it has been. It will also attempt to explain the rationale behind the current changes. It is perhaps an unreliable memoir of a phenomenon whose history has not properly been charted.

What is the oz-TeacherNet?

The oz-TeacherNet is, at its simplest, a website which hosts curriculum projects and a number of general and specific professional lists for teachers. There are almost 2000 individuals registered with the site at time of writing (March 2007). This is surprising as its pages are generally open to the world. Its lists have a current combined subscription of around 1500 people.

The oz-TeacherNet has had two “homes” - <http://www.owl.qut.edu.au/oz-teachernet> and <http://www.rite.ed.qut.edu.au/oz-teachernet>. But it is now on the move again, this time to its own domain. The site can now be found at <http://www.oz-teachernet.edu.au>.

For many, the oz-TeacherNet is manifested through its main community list – *oz-teachers*, which is a ‘community’ in every sense of the word, and is an important component of the lives of many of its subscribers. This list operates somewhat independently of both the website and the curriculum projects, with the site acting largely as a management space for list management. The subscription to the oz-teachers community list is currently around 700 and our server was handling a minimum of 750,000 messages a month (based on average figures from September 2006 to February 2007).

The project-based lists are the conduit to working with others in online curriculum projects. The oz-TeacherNet has hosted lists for groups connected by their interest in Gifted and Talented education, the teaching of languages other than English, and in broader domains such as literacy. These have been with us since we began and arose at a time when there was little or no list hosting available. Thus this represented an important service to professional groups who were wanting to connect and to collaborate in then new online spaces.

Where we were ...

The concept of the oz-TeacherNet emerged in 1995. Its first members were Michelle Williams, Michael Ryan and Peter Kendal. Its first Project Officer was Lindy McKeown and the initial graphics and static website were designed by Bruce Young.

The oz-TeacherNet was formed at a time of great creative energy in information and communication technology. The World Wide Web had arrived and was popularising the Internet. Those who had struggled with telecommunications through KeyLink and bulletin boards now saw that opportunities to involve more people and to use this resource in meaningful ways in education. In Queensland, computer education was at a high point. The then Queensland Department of Education had released its *Guidelines for the use of computers in teaching and learning* and the presence of computers in all schools meant that teachers had to learn to deal with them. Universities were beginning to think about opportunities for studying and collaborating online. For QUT, the oz-TeacherNet provided an extraordinary test bed for research and ways to communicate with distant or external students.

It is self-evident that the oz-TeacherNet was very much ahead of its time in 1995. According to McKeown (1996), its first Project Officer, the core beliefs underpinning the establishment and development of oz-TeacherNet were:

1. The trend away from releasing teachers during teaching time to engage in professional development means that more flexible access to professional development activities is required. Involvement in an electronic community is one way of increasing the opportunities available to teachers seeking professional development.

2. There should be an electronic community for teachers which is distinctly Australian.
3. An electronic community should not be seen as a one-stop shop for teacher's professional development but should be integrated with, and provide links to, professional development activities provided by other agents such as employing authorities and professional organisations.
4. Electronic communities have the potential to support the professional development efforts of other agencies by providing extension activities such as access to key aspects of conferences for those who cannot physically attend, encouraging extended discussion of key issues that arise from conferences and other professional development activities, increasing the number of people who can interact with visiting experts, keeping in touch with what others are doing.
5. The approach is to focus on connecting teachers to other teachers - a teachers first approach.
6. The role of the project team is to provide a structure in which it will be possible to conduct events, encourage reflection and sharing, and generate activity. In doing this, the project team will attempt to encourage teacher ownership of the space and provide opportunities for teachers to determine how the space develops.
7. This project will help to provide a pathway through the Internet to enable Australian teachers to connect with each other for the purpose of sharing experiences.
8. Teachers see curriculum as their core business.
9. Electronic communities will only continue to be supported by teachers if they are grounded in teacher practices.
10. oz-TeacherNet is a cross-curriculum place and not just a place for technology teachers.
11. oz-TeacherNet is a national cross-systemic place for preschool, primary and secondary teachers and other people interested in P-12 education.

The language of these principles reveals its age particularly the reference to “electronic communities.” The concept, however, reveals real prescience in the role of such communities in the professional development of teachers and its accurate description of the interactions which would emerge through online discussion.

The oz-teachers list remains, a dozen years later, a lively place which continues to enact the founders’ vision. Its current membership is indicative of its popularity and its continuing importance in the lives of many Australian teachers. An analysis of oz-teachers conducted by Martyn Wild in 1999 noted a membership of 1071 with the majority (99%) from Australia. It was also noted that a large number of list members appeared to be students (Wild, 1999). This trend has continued and it is of interest to see the numbers of students who join each year who remain after they graduate into the teaching profession. There are currently, on average, 4-10 new list subscriptions each week.

The oz-TeacherNet developed online curriculum projects, namely *Book Raps* and *Travel Buddies*. The fledgling *Project Atmosphere* Australia, designed and developed by Sel Kerans, became an OTN project in 1996. Although unwritten, there was an agreed understanding that these projects would be provided free of charge to schools. The purpose was altruistic on one hand and on the other, borne of necessity, as to create a test bed for research in online teaching and learning environments, a certain critical mass of action and engagement was needed. The success of these projects is due substantially to the work of volunteer classroom teachers such as Cherrol McGhee, Jonathan Clark and Lyn Allsop – to name a few.

These were supported by dedicated lists providing a forum for teachers specifically involved in these projects. The conversations, then and now, were about shared dilemmas and solutions to logistical issues, and perhaps, more importantly to sustain a sense of community, they were about moments of joy. The purpose of the Travel Buddy teacher was described on the website as being where teachers could:

... find partner classes around the world for travel buddy projects; share classroom management ideas for conducting great travel buddy projects; ask questions about technical, logistical and curriculum problems related to travel buddy projects; brainstorm new ideas; lurk and listen to everyone else chat about funny, sad, exciting, incredible travel buddy adventures

Other projects have emerged and have gone when they could no longer be sustained or had run their course. These included Global Youth Forums, the SAIL project (Students and Industry Links) and Virtual Field Trips. The oz-TeacherNet has also acted as a facilitator, namely, its attempt to collate a collection of Australian webquests and its success in supporting an Australian reference group for trials of Indiana University's *Quest Atlantis* project. It is of interest to note that this "passing" of projects is consonant with the founding principle of "conduct events, encourage reflection and sharing, and generate activity."

The oz-TeacherNet was originally housed on an experimental server known as "owl" at QUT (a bird not an acronym!), a project managed and designed by Michael Ryan and assisted by Bruce Young. Teachers with a long association with the oz-TeacherNet will be familiar with its first URL – <http://www.owl.qut.edu.au/oz-teachernet>.

The first website was a series of static pages each featuring its distinctive unofficial logo of a chalkboard on an easel with the words oz-TeacherNet written in white chalk (designed by Bruce Young). The oz-teachers list, running on Lyris, was referred to as the "general teachers list" and its alias address was oz-teachers@owl.qut.edu.au. Subscription required a message to be sent to majordomo.



Figure 1: Chalkboard logo

Around 1998-1999, it became apparent that a flat page website design was too labour intensive and patently representative of a passing technology. To address this, a database-driven interactive site was adopted. David Potter, Janine Bowes and the Aussie School House (ASH) enter the oz-TeacherNet story and made significant changes to how the site was built and maintained. During this period, the oz-Teachers' site resided on the ASH server and was mirrored on the RITE server at QUT. The list address became @rite.ed.qut.edu.au but much content was held on ASH. It was around this time that Lindy McKeown's contract ended with the oz-TeacherNet and given financial constraints, a decision was made to advertise the Project Officer's position as part-time. The incoming Project Officer was Debbie Kember, who was later to become President of QSITE (Queensland Society for Information Technology in Education). Lindy had made a real mark in the area of online curriculum projects and her advocacy in this area is well remembered. Her recent award of the National ICT Leader of the Year (2005) and ISTE International Affiliate Leader of the Year (2005) are well deserved.

The next big change for oz-teachers came when Michelle Williams decided to leave her "day job" at QUT in 2000 to further education in Far North Queensland and places like Nauru through consultancies. While never officially the Director of the ozTeacherNet, with that role being undertaken by Peter Kendall, Michelle was certainly a major source of inspiration in the design of new projects and in determining which were the new technologies and strategies to be adopted. Michelle has been the President of QSITE and also of the national body, ACCE (Australian Council for Computers in Education) and maintains a high profile in education in Australia. She has remained

indirectly connected with the group through their undertaking research into the *Reach In-Reach Out* project she established in Cape York.

The next retirement was of Peter Kendall in 2002. In his last year, he organised the employment of Leigh Wayper and then Bronwyn Stuckey, who later took on a Project Officer role, to manage the lists. On Peter's retirement, the Directorship of the RITE Group passed to Jackie Stokes. When Jackie in turn retired in 2004, the Directorship moved to Jenny Masters and Margaret Lloyd who assumed co-direction of the group. Of the original management team, Michael Ryan continues to work as an academic at QUT but other responsibilities, particularly in management of faculty technical services and the coordination of large undergraduate units, has interrupted his association with the RITE Group.

Our latest "loss" has been Jenny Masters who has left QUT and taken up an appointment with Latrobe University. The good news is that she is remaining as part of the management team – now extended to a co-operative between Shaun Nykvist, Margaret Lloyd and Jenny – and also continue her supervision of the Travel Buddy project. Jenny's first job at QUT was as the Research Assistant for the RITE group and she maintained her connection with the group and the oz-TeacherNet as she became more involved with teaching and her own research.

Our latest addition has been Shaun Nykvist who began at QUT as a sessional academic and higher degree student in 1999. He now has a tenured academic position and has taken on the critical technical supervision of the oz-TeacherNet. It is his expertise that has brought us to our adoption of open source software.

The oz-TeacherNet was funded for many years through our participation in the Queensland Department of Education's Tertiary In-Service (TIS) scheme and later through professional development projects with Brisbane Catholic Education Office and other groups. Margaret Lloyd's first job at the University, apart some sessional teaching, was to manage these in-service programs (from 1996-1999). The RITE Group decided to funnel all professional development monies into its accounts rather than personal consultancy. This has continued as new members of staff have joined the University and the RITE Group. In return, individuals' attendance at conferences was supported and they had some server space to play with! This tradition continues with the oz-teachers group but a different, but similarly transparent, funding regime has been instituted.

It is often incorrectly assumed that the oz-TeacherNet is financially supported by QUT. This is not the case although the University does provide our server with a home and is generous in allowing its academics to continue this community work. It is also important to note that the oz-TeacherNet does not have any external commercial or direct systemic support. It has been wholly funded by additional work done by the RITE Group. Costs to the group have been for servers and their replacement, software, licences (particularly for the Lyris mail client) and for salaries.

Where we are

The oz-TeacherNet in 2007 is still alive and continues to provide core services for Australian teachers but is facing the dilemmas of time and finance which are the bane of all voluntary not-for-profit activities. Times are changing, too, and some of the services we initially offered are now replicated by systemic and commercial providers. This has caused us to reflect and rethink who we are and, if we are to continue, how this should best happen.

A recent Internet search on the phrase "oz-teachernet" drew almost 5,000 hits – the quantity and source of the references was unexpected and an indication to us of the scope of our impact. Figure 2 shows a screen dump from this search which intriguingly displays entries in both Greek and Japanese. Other references were from sites based in France, Germany, Italy, the Czech Republic, Canada and Peru. One of the unlikeliest links was to a Slovenian Language Archive. There were links from department of education sites from most Australian states and national organisations such as

Australian Council for Computers in Education (ACCE) and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC). The impact of the oz-TeacherNet is not to be taken lightly. A search using differing hyphenation and capitalisation may yield increased “hits.”

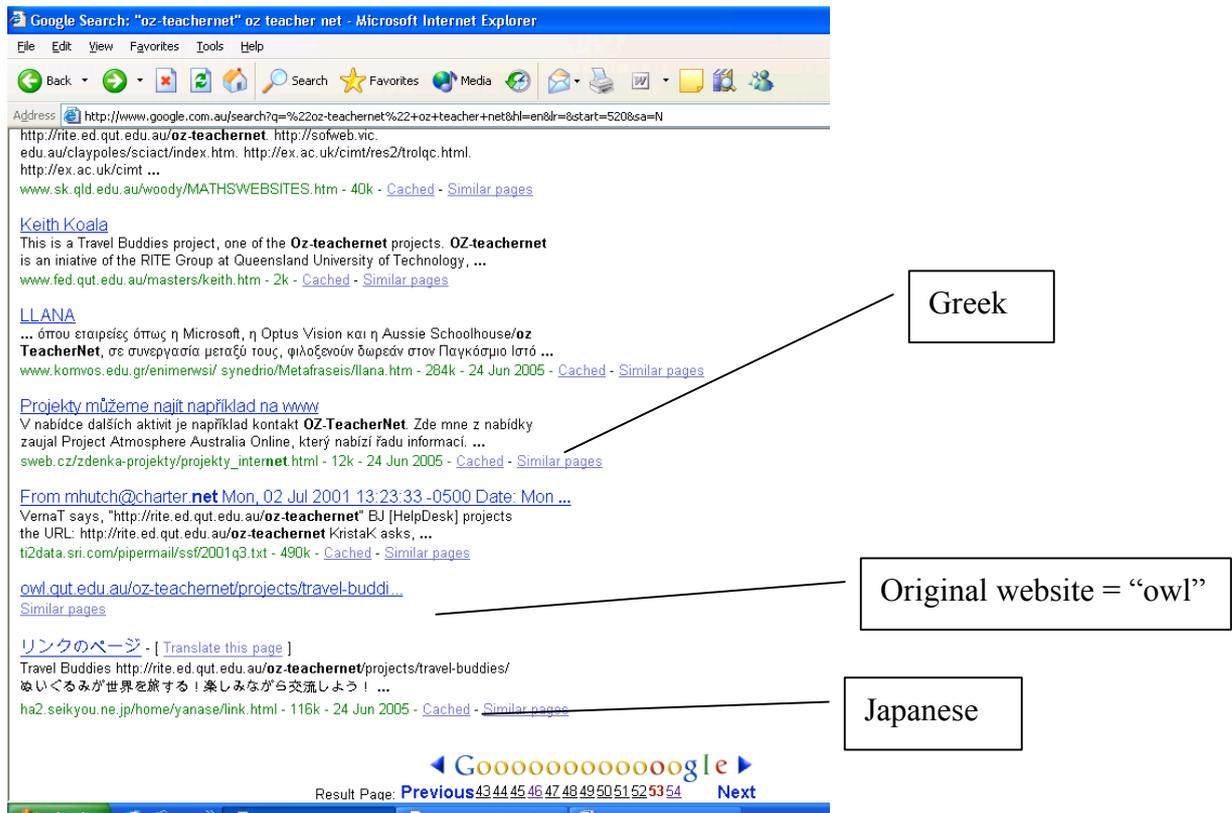


Figure 2: Annotated screen shot of “oz-teachernet” search

Where we are going – what next?

A decision was made around 2002 to revamp the website and, in this instance, the database design chosen was PostNuke. Programmers and a graphic artist were hired and, under Bronwyn Stuckey’s direction, the new site was developed. This, in hindsight, has not been particularly successful and, because of financial constraints and other uncertainties, we have been unable to do much about this. But things have now changed, Shaun Nykvist, a permanent member of QUT staff from 2003, has been working on a redevelopment of the website making it an exemplar of open source principles. Working with him has been James Iseppi and casual programmers. The new site, the new domain has now been released and with, a genuine sense of reinvigoration for what we are doing.

There is much affection for the oz-TeacherNet and it is important in forward planning to be aware of, but not limited by, the project’s past achievements. We need to be more pragmatic than nostalgic. It is, for instance, unlikely that funding will be available again to employ fulltime project officers and so, as the slogan goes, we need to think differently about how the same work can be done. The onus of work such as website design and list management has shifted to volunteer academics who are already busy raising the necessary funds to keep servers running and software licences up to date. This environment is not conducive to innovation or experimentation. At its simplest, the oz-TeacherNet needs:

- people to run it
- money to run it
- energy to run it
- time to run it

- to keep up with changes in technology
- to keep alert to opportunities for funding
- to keep alert to opportunities for new exciting and practical projects

The current status is that the oz-teacher group, again to borrow a business cliché, needs to work smarter rather than harder and to make use of smart tools where we can. This has already begun to happen. For example, the oz-TeacherNet is now completely open source. In 2002, we moved to Linux server software and adopted the free Mailman service for our lists. The new website is the endpoint in this trajectory.

We have also begun to seek out sponsorship through professional associations. We have similarly embarked on a program to again heighten awareness of who we are and what we are doing. We are coming to believe, as previously noted, that we are the longest running and largest teacher community of its type in the world and that this is something of which to be proud. Some which began around the same time have fallen by the wayside – but oz-TeacherNet has continued. There have been, in the last dozen or so years, times when we believed we should, literally, pull the plug. The emergence of services such as EdNA (Education Network Australia) similarly offered web, and now wiki, hosting and many ISPs offer free webspace to subscribers. But the interest continues – the lists are lively, the projects have continued, and people still speak fondly of the community.

The changes ahead include:

1. the development of a broader more distributed management model;
2. the continuing move from proprietary software to open source;
3. a need to move to a sponsorship model; and,
4. acting as a conduit between schools and organisations such as Universities.

There is an aphorism – the more things change, the more they stay the same (*la plus ça change, la plus ça même*). It usually is intended as a disparaging remark about the state of the world and the continuance of the fundamentals hypocrisies and injustices of life). In this instance, it means that despite what is happening behind the scenes and who actually is the RITE Group and now oz-teachers, the oz-TeacherNet projects and our email lists look as they always have and do what they have always done. This is a real testament to the simple and robust principles which lie at their heart.

It is important, at this point, to note that managing the oz-TeacherNet is, as it has always been, a voluntary extra-curricular activity. Much of what we do is concerned with generating the income to maintain and replace servers and software. Our ‘spare’ time is used in managing lists, fending off hack attacks, and trying to keep up to date with the technology needed to run something like this. And when the current management team move on, then undoubtedly, like the handle and blade of Hone Heke’s axe, others will step up to take over these roles.

References

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