



# Demolishing the silos

by Geoff Heriot

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There are many learning needs and many education providers throughout Australia striving to come to terms with the rapidity of change and the force of competition for scarce resources.

Social and political discourse is peppered with related concerns about globalisation, regional disadvantage, citizenship and political alienation, public versus private interest, the consequences of workforce restructuring, an ageing population and manifestations of community 'change fatigue'.

More than ever, in this fluid and complex environment, the well-being of individuals and the community depends on their *confidence* and their *competence*: their confidence of identity, access to opportunity, and 'voice' in community affairs; and their competence to deal with work, civic obligations and relationships.

The underlying message from people in diverse circumstances throughout metropolitan and regional Australia is simple and stark: don't exclude us and don't leave us behind. It is the same message we've heard for a decade or more via social commentators, market research reports, attitudinal studies, the emotive talk-back agendas of commercial radio 'shock-jocks', and election outcomes.

Yet I find, with notable exceptions, much policy development in Australia still tends to occur in intellectual or political silos. It is a matter of direct relevance to my role with the ABC in developing a new generation of lifelong learning services.

Emerging digital media platforms –including multi-channel television services, datacasting, narrowband and broadband internet – offer tantalising opportunities for commerce, entertainment and communities of interest for those Australians wishing to connect with one another and the world around them. They will be more user-friendly and navigable than existing computer-based services.

Significantly – though not inevitably – the new media may be used to engage a critical mass of Australian society in the adventure of lifelong discovery, creative recreation and re-skilling.

People already access and create knowledge for themselves by using diverse sources that extend beyond formal institutions to the media, libraries, friendship and community groups.

The challenge will be to communicate in meaningful ways that offer relevant forms of knowledge. These may be simulations, self-help and advisory resources, 'starter-kit' courses and virtual communities of interest as much as they may be more highly structured learning programs.

Indeed, education and training providers need to re-think the way they structure and bundle learning resources, whether for accredited training or not, as much as media organisations need to come to terms with the interactive relationships they must develop with audiences.

Next year, the ABC plans to launch a lifelong learning service – *ABC Knowledge* – which will be broadcast as part of a new digital television channel, called *ABC Plus (ABC+)*. It will address the needs of adult audiences and young people making the transition from school to the adult environment.

In its early form, *ABC Knowledge* will bring together the broad reach of television and the individual convenience of the internet, providing learning pathways. Over time, as digital services develop, audiences will be offered interactive functions through their television receivers as well as their PCs.

*ABC Knowledge* will grow to be a safe space, in which people may confidently explore, play and use tool-boxes for the mind. It may help to break down some of the fears and some of the barriers perceived by major segments of the Australian community to their participation in learning. But it will not do so alone.

In this new and uncertain world, a major priority for the ABC is to work with education providers, community organisations, public agencies and industry groups to link the potential of national public broadcasting with the expertise and local infrastructure of Australia's learning communities.

It is no time for a silo mentality.