



From silos to clusters

by Geoff Heriot

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Writing the first of these ALA Commentaries a year ago, I emphasised the need for a collaborative approach to help engage a critical mass of Australian society in the contemporary challenge of learning for life (see *Demolishing the silos*, 8 March 2000).

A major priority for the ABC, as a national public broadcaster, is to work with education providers, public agencies and others to harness the potential of emerging digital media to support lifelong learning.

Since then, Australian free-to-air broadcasters have begun to transmit digital television services in parallel with traditional analog transmissions.

Few consumers yet have access to either digital receivers or decoders with which to view digital television – and it is too soon for anyone in this country to sample the promised world of an integrated digital TV equipped with a hard drive, internet capability, scores of channels, and diverse transactional and personal communication services.

By contrast, around one-quarter of households in the UK receive more than 250 digital TV channels, with a rapid take-up of multi-channel and interactive services.

Meanwhile the ABC's commitment to a collaborative approach to education has been re-affirmed by Managing Director Jonathan Shier. He will shortly announce the appointment of an eminent professional to chair an ABC education development advisory committee. Other members will be invited from different education sectors.

The role of the advisory committee would be twofold: to advise and assist the ABC in the development of programs and services; and to provide a point of connection between the Board and Managing Director of the ABC and Australia's education and training communities.

Recently Shier described his vision and manifesto for the ABC in an address to the National Press Club in Canberra. A

starting point, he said, was to be very clear about the contemporary role and challenges of national public broadcasting. Implicit in the legislative Charter – to inform, entertain and educate – was the mission to better enable Australians to manage and engage creatively with the challenges of contemporary life.

Shier noted that, although Australians placed a high value on learning, more than 20 per cent claimed to face barriers to participation. Moreover:

“Issues of access and equality become more complex in the digital era. In the past, anyone with a television receiver could access virtually all of the available programming, regardless of whether it was a high-end home entertainment system or an old black-and-white set. Not any longer. The more expensive a digital receiving device, the higher its functionality and greater its access to services.”

“That is why I am placing so much emphasis on the role of the ABC in education. Not only as a knowledge bank for the nation, although that is significant in itself. But also because of the untapped potential of new digital media to make available rich, interactive programs and content. Audiences need only be a ‘click away’ from further exploration, knowledge and opportunities for re-skilling.”

The opportunity to make a significant new contribution is tantalisingly close. Already the ABC is preparing a technical laboratory trial of the equipment required to deliver an interactive curriculum support service for schools; and it has requested government funding for a full trial.

Imagine the data capacity of digital media combined with the production values of the ABC and the user relationships made possible through interactivity. And it is potentially quite simple for users. In the absence of a digital receiver, a provider can acquire a digital decoder (US\$100), enabling interactive programs and content to be received from the ABC in the same way a normal television receives programming.