In today’s “e-world”, distance is no barrier to successful learning. This is no more evident than at the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education (SIDE) in Western Australia. Founded in 1918, SIDE is the centre for distance learning within the Department of Education of Western Australia (DoE). The SIDE Leederville campus provides quality education for over 4000 students from Pre-primary to year 12 in isolated circumstances in Western Australia and beyond. SIDE provides education for students who, for various reasons, cannot attend classes in a regular school. All learning areas within the Western Australian curriculum are taught to students in all phases of learning, using a combination of synchronous (Centra web-conferencing & Video-conferencing), asynchronous (Moodle) and traditional delivery techniques (Print, CD, phone, email) in order to better engage and motivate students.

SIDE students can be:
• in rural or metropolitan areas.
• travelling or living in Australia or overseas.
• in need of remediation or extension.
• young professionals.
• facing medical or emotional challenges.
• primary or secondary.
In fact anyone can be a SIDE student.

At SIDE it is an expectation that all students will have the same educational opportunities as their peers in regular, face-to-face schools. SIDE is committed to the provision of learning programs that cater for all needs, providing students with a wide range of rich learning experiences, facilitated by the use of interactive technology. Online learning at SIDE is not an add-on, nor is it a reward for our students: it is just the way they learn.

This paper will examine the evolution of on-line delivery at SIDE, the strengths and challenges of such a programme and the directions SIDE is taking to embrace the concept of “u-learning” into the 21st century. It will also present strategies regular, face-to-face schools can use to embark on the online learning journey.

**ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...A short history**
Prior to 1918, parents of isolated students in Western Australia, who could not send their children to boarding schools in Perth or hire private tutors, were left to their own devices. This adhoc situation prompted an application to the then Minister of Education in 1917 requesting that a "correspondence branch" be established in WA, similar to those operating successfully elsewhere in Australia. After an initial rejection, the Director of Education, recommended the establishment of such a correspondence school in WA. The main purpose of this newly established school was to provide education to the
'isolated' and the 'outback' students at primary school level. The WA Correspondence School was officially established in September 1918. To supplement the work of the Correspondence School, daily broadcasts were introduced in 1940. Prior to that students listened to general school broadcasts as part of their weekly work. These new lessons were given by the teachers and reflected the curriculum. This gave a greater feeling of cohesion to the school and student work practices greatly improved. Communications continued to improve in 1959 with the first official radio school in Western Australia being established in Meekatharra. The school utilised the Royal Flying Doctor Service's direct, two-way radio network for up to three hours a day, transmitting from a simple classroom in the town. A small, easy to operate transceiver was developed for the students' use. 5 Schools of the Air continue to provide quality education to rural and remote students in primary school.

In 1995 SIDE emerged from the amalgamation of the Distance Education Centre (DEC) and the 5 Schools of the Air. Since then SIDE has grown to incorporate all curriculum areas and all phases of schooling. Our student cohort has diversified enormously. Whilst still catering for the students in geographically isolated circumstances, an isolated student is one who, for a range of special circumstances, cannot access mainstream schooling.

4000 students, 140 teachers, PP to Yr12, all curriculum areas, 1000+ online lessons per week, 70+ Moodle courses...SIDE has come a long way in the last 100 years.

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...The story in 2010

SIDE operates a blended learning model. Teachers have access to a range of delivery tools from traditional print to live, online classrooms. Teachers develop the most effective model for curriculum delivery based on the content to be delivered, the context of the students and the students’ preferred learning style. Teachers receive initial training in the use of the various applications for online delivery, backed up by continual support to develop online teaching and learning skills. SIDE is increasingly recognised as a national leader in online delivery.

The curriculum required for flexible learning has to be carefully planned and developed with the context of the students in mind. Problems that can be easily rectified in a F2F classroom can become showstoppers for distance learners. SIDE has developed a comprehensive curriculum design to delivery process in response to the changing role of the school and the needs of SIDE students. Online learning brings flexibility, collaboration and engagement to the curriculum.

ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...What is looks like?

SYNCHRONOUS DELIVERY

Centra is a web-based application that supports real-time online communication in a 'virtual classroom' setting. Staff, students and guests can collaborate using audio, video and graphics. Centra includes a range of tools and functions that enable users to easily create events and event agendas incorporating course materials, and participate in events. Virtual classes are structured to replicate the physical classroom experience. Centra is fully interactive and students have responded very positively to the inclusion of these live lessons to their weekly routine.
Video-conferencing is also used by staff at SIDE for live lessons with students. It is especially successful with large groups of learners in single schools but it is expensive technology to maintain and its use is not as diffuse as Centra.

**ASYNCHRONOUS DELIVERY**

Moodle is the LMS used by SIDE. This has recently been introduced as the preferred LMS, moving away from Janison Toolbox and the results have been spectacular. Staff have responded with enthusiasm to training, seeing the development of more than 70 courses in just 6 months! Students have also responded positively.

**PRINT & ONLINE RESOURCES**

Until recently SIDE teachers only used resources developed by external agencies such as WestOne. There is now a considerable shift to involve SIDE teachers in the design and development of materials. All the WestOne content is editable by SIDE teachers online and the school also runs in-house curriculum development projects to address identified areas of need. Online resources can also be printed where the need arises.

SIDE teachers are now provided with industry standard software and hardware to develop resources, supported by continual professional development that focuses on effective online pedagogy. SIDE is fortunate to have the Multimedia Centre which can be used to develop a range of audio and video resources for web based delivery.

**OTHER**

Phone/Email/Fax: SIDE teachers keep in regular contact with students and are accountable for maintaining open lines of communications.

Student visits: SIDE is always open to students. There are those who visit regularly and those who may never visit, but they are all encouraged to come in and meet their teachers and utilise the extensive resource centre.

SIDE staff are committed to visiting students, both school-based and home-based. Visiting students provides SIDE teachers with a greater insight into their learning environment which enables them to better understand and cater for their needs.

**ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...How have we got there?**

SIDE has prioritised online learning within the school plan over the last four years. The Online Teaching and Learning Team play a critical role in supporting teachers and ensuring good practice is developed. In 2006 the team developed a series of Online Instructor Competencies to articulate what good online teaching and learning should look like within the school. Each teacher is required to measure their progress against the competencies as part of their performance management. The OTL team continually provide professional development to help teachers move along the OIC continuum.

In addition, the Senior Leadership Team set annual online delivery targets to which teachers are held accountable.
The OTL team provides comprehensive professional development in all areas of online teaching and learning with good pedagogy underpinning all these sessions. The PD which trains staff in new applications must, by its very nature, focus on the “how” to click. But it is soon very evident that equally as important is “why” to click. Teachers can easily become overly-impressed by what the technology is capable of, losing sight of good teaching practises.

OTL provide support for staff and students in all aspects on online teaching. We are always looking for new software to assist teachers in creating lesson content.

**ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...**

**Tips for face-to-face schools?**

Or...

**How could your school get into online teaching and learning on a small budget??**

SIDE is an online school, with a generous, though not endless, budget to facilitate this. However many of the principles we use would be easily transferred into a regular, face-to-face school.

A lot of our applications (eg: Centra/video-conferencing) are costly, however there are many open-source equivalents which would function equally as well when used on a smaller scale. Moodle is open-source so this could be a good starting point for many of you wanting to get online.

Choosing the right technology for your own school is something that only you can do, but ask yourselves these obvious questions

- Why?
- Who?
- How?
- How much?
- Why???

Once these questions have been answered, the most important thing to acknowledge is that online learning is not the magic pill...it will not solve all problems in schools...disaffected students won’t automatically become engaged and motivated...student behaviour won’t improve dramatically...putting a computer in front of students will not solve problems. Teachers have always engaged and motivated kids, establishing a rapport with students and making lessons fun is crucial if an online programme is to be successful.

**ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING AT SIDE...**

**The future?**

SIDE is committed to providing quality education for students learning in isolation and is continually looking for ways to ensure this happens. The Online Teaching and Learning team, in partnership with the Senior Leadership team, is continually researching new ways to achieve this. Online learning has evolved quickly from “e-learning”, to “m-learning” to “u-learning”. SIDE is currently investigating Iphone applications which could be used to assist our students. The recent release of the Centra Iphone app will be tested to evaluate it usefulness for our students. SIDE’s philosophy is that technology is to be used to facilitate and enhance student learning. Why we use it is paramount in our decision making and student engagement, motivation and learning underpins everything we do at the Schools of Isolated and Distance Education.