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1. What I learned

The most important thing I learned came through the hands-on experience with New Zealander Ian Thomson when we visited, as a group, the small island of Manono off the coast of Upolu, the main island of Samoa, to set up a *Rural-link* Wifi network for the local community.

Another group ascended Mt Tafua, the highest point in western Upolu, to install a relay antenna that would transmit a signal to the island from the ISP in Apia. We brought a receiver with stand, cable and several laptop computers. The equipment was designed to be easy to install and maintain and we were able to *ping* the relay antenna quite quickly. There were configuration problems for the other team though, so we couldn't open a browser on the island but the principles behind the technical setup were a revelation to me. I appreciated how clever the low-maintenance technology was, the technical challenge of delivering a signal across a body of water, and of choosing the right site on the other side of the island to provide the school there with connectivity.

My conversation with Ian while we were on the island will stay with me for a long time. The most important issue was not the technical infrastructure we helped to set up, but the long term social and cultural ramifications for the community. We met the mayor of the island and the head teacher, and a number of young people who live and go to school there. We all agreed in the group that this service should be monitored and evaluated in the coming years. I hope we can follow through on that.

Related to this, the theme of Telecenters was a recurring motif of the conference. Many Pacific Island Countries are beginning to deploy a Telecenter model for rural communities in one form or another. The role of solar energy and internet-by-radio technologies was another technical issue that interested me greatly. These projects also have interesting and important consequences for the responsibilities of women in the community.

I found my conversations with John Crain the CEO of ICANN about DNS management and the imminent arrival of IP6 very instructive. The depth and scope of issues like Net Neutrality were also new to me, something that Vint Cerf emphasised also during his keynote. The presence of Digicel, and their presentation on their 'aggressive marketing strategy' was also provocative. I was also able, as I hoped, to get started on my GIS project with the help of Frank Martin. In fact I've started an online course on ArcGIS and I learned in Apia that there's a GIS conference in Suva in November which I'll attend.

I appreciated presentations on the work of the Forum Secretariat, and Tia Purcell's presentation on Samoa's ICT strategy. Learning about the functioning of PICISOC, meeting all the organisers of the conference, especially the local Apia organisers, and joining in the PICISOC board meeting were valuable experiences for me. I intend to participate in the conference next year in the Solomons and I'll spend this year laying the groundwork for a new PICISOC SIG on *education and training networks* that I'll propose at the next general meeting.

But the single most important take-home message for me had to do with the emerging role of internet-based content and services across the Pacific. Tele-learning, tele-medicine and tele-banking are often talked about as rapidly-approaching issues on the horizon, but my experience on Monolo island showed me that low-cost easy-to-install technologies are going to make the internet widely available across the Pacific in the next decade. This means that content and services will become of crucial importance.

2. What I shared

At the conference itself I presented an overview and initial findings on the *Pacific eLearning Observatory* project that I manage. It's a lot of information and I covered the key points in 30 mins and got a positive response afterwards and for the rest of the conference. I thanked PIP at the podium for supporting me with a fellowship.

Aside from sharing my work and news about our research at the University of the South Pacific, I was also able to share information about USP's efforts and future plans with respect to distance learning in the region, in numerous private conversations. It became evident to me the importance and the increasing demand for what we do – being “in the field” in Samoa showed me how network access, content and services and demand for education are converging, and we (USP) are the obvious one-stop-shop for quality education and training in the region. My boss was impressed by this perspective and she was pleased to learn about my experience.

3. What I am doing to share my information at home - including to who and when.

When I returned to Suva I made a presentation to 40 of my colleagues at USP distance learning department, discussing the key elements of my experience at the conference.

They were impressed too, and I emphasised the issue of content and services and the rapidly changing landscape in terms of connectivity in the region and what it means for us as education providers. Several colleagues told me after the meeting how motivating they found that, and asked what more needs to be done now.

I also had meetings with two senior managers in distance learning services focusing on the issues of rural telecenters and the anticipated boom in

demand for distance learning services in the coming decade. I proposed that we set up a team or task force to look into the issue of telecenters: setting them up, managing them, evaluating them, and preparing ourselves for the new demands they will place on our outputs.

One of the contacts I made at the conference works at the Fijian Ministry of Communications and is responsible for rolling out the telecenters in Fiji. at the conference we discussed the role of USP in this and together with Ian Thomson proposed setting up a weekend workshop in Suva to train a task force in rural wireless connectivity. My boss liked this idea and it's up to me to follow through now.

Thanks for this great opportunity.

Robert Whelan