



Massey University Enhances Professional Development and Language Learning Skills Across New Zealand with Wimba

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-Duncan O'Hara, Teaching Consultant, Training & Development Unit, Massey University

With a tradition of academic excellence, Massey University is the nearest thing New Zealand has to a national university. It has nearly 41,000 students enrolled on three campuses, with 21,000 nationally and worldwide extramural students on its roll. Historically, it has been a leader in the field of distance education before it branched into online learning nearly 15 years ago. Massey continues to play a significant role in demonstrating best practices in online education, and as a result, other institutions in New Zealand have since adopted distance technologies and processes, several of whom even modeled their programs after Massey's. More specifically, two departments at Massey – the Training and Development Unit and the School of Language Studies – have relied on Wimba Voice for several years to bring a human, collaborative element to their online courses.

Massey's Training and Development Unit (TDU) is a centralised unit of the University that offers teaching and training support services. It acts as the centralized center that specializes in professional development training needs for staff across

all three Massey campuses – Wellington, Palmerston North, and Auckland – as it coordinates research training, learning and teaching training, inductions for new staff, and online learning. Recently, the TDU embarked on an aggressive and innovative plan to deliver online professional development to lecturers at 14 geographically dispersed institutions across New Zealand.

"Our job is to show Massey staff what the possibilities are in eLearning," says Duncan O'Hara, Teaching Consultant for the TDU. "We need to be one step ahead of the game in order for our staff to be ahead of the game. We're delivering professional development resources to a number of institutions and we need to show them that we're current with our knowledge."

Massey relies on Blackboard Campus Edition as its course management systems (CMS) and is also exploring a transition to Moodle. Blackboard Campus Edition is utilized by many of its staff and faculty as the asynchronous hub of their online courses. And this is where Wimba enters the picture.



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WIMBA PRODUCTS AND SERVICES

- Wimba Voice

KEY BENEFITS

- Saved money by recording foreign language exercises online instead of mailing audio cassettes internationally
- Increased students' language skills
- Eliminated lengthy travel to face-to-face sites for assessment

Philip Williams

Professor and Head of the School of Language Studies, Massey University



Duncan O'Hara

Teaching Consultant, Training & Development Unit, Massey University



WHAT THEY'RE SAYING

"We think that Wimba Voice is going to become a vehicle for oral examinations. We won't have to use the telephone or send lecturers all over the country to meet with students to assess them. All students need is the internet and a reasonable quality headset and sound card in the PC."

-Philip Williams

The TDU team made the important decision to run its Massey professional development completely online. "All of our professional development for online learning and teaching is now ALL online, and we think that is unique," says O'Hara. "The key for us delivering online was that we wanted lecturers to experience what students would experience – they need to see what it feels like to be an online student." Thus, TDU provides specific learning and teaching resources that helps instructors develop online best practices and exposes them to the possibilities of collaborative online learning. One such resource, Wimba Voice, is readily available, particularly because it integrates with CMS's such as Blackboard and Moodle.

"The social, human element can get lost," explains O'Hara. "But thanks to funding and by using resources more cleverly we felt using Wimba Voice was a good opportunity to connect everybody, humanise the experience, and gauge where people were with the programme."

Meanwhile, Massey's School of Language Studies utilizes 23 full-time staff and numerous adjunct faculty to teach 117 language courses to approximately 2,400 students. Close to two thirds of these students are extramural, located in numerous countries throughout Asia, all of whom learn remotely using WebCT as the main learning platform. It teaches programmes in East Asian Studies, European Languages, Linguistics and Second Language Teaching and English for Academic Purposes. A key issue facing the University was that extramural students, on whom the department depended for a substantial proportion of its operating revenue, were missing out on some aspects of their language learning experience – remote students felt that they weren't getting enough practice for oral and listening exercises.

These remote students noted that the instructional approach was overly dependent upon text, and that when they did have access to media such as languages recorded on CDs or cassette tapes, these often weren't interactive enough. Students also felt that they didn't have enough opportunities to engage with other students or lecturers. And in order to administer oral examinations, telephoning or travel to distant sites was necessary and cumbersome.

In fact, when it came to assessing students' language abilities, lecturers sometimes asked students to email them large audio recordings or put audio cassettes in the post.

As with other units in the University, occasionally the school organised short blocks of intensive face-to-face study for these students. This often involves the lecturer and/or the students traveling significant distances to meet, and of course, this also means time out of the office along with expenses for travel and accommodation. This was expensive both in terms of time and money.

Massey recognized that the process involved in catering to the needs of extra-mural language students was somewhat inadequate. Problems included:

- From a pedagogical point of view, studying a language remotely was often disruptive to the learning experience due to the lengthy turn around time for getting media back and forth from student to teacher.
- There were serious limitations on student interaction with each other.
- It was expensive and time consuming to travel to face-to-face sites for brief, intensive sessions.

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Additionally, all of the audio-based learning was occurring outside of WebCT which would normally serve as the hub of the distance learning experience. With a somewhat fragmented learning experience to deal with, many students were reluctant to use WebCT at all.

In addition to student issues was that of staff communication. The School is spread across different campuses and communication between staff on different campuses has always been a challenge, and a dependency on costly telephone calls had become a concern.

Finally, there was the issue of competition among education providers. This School did not want to take Massey's place as New Zealand's pre-eminent provider of distance learning for granted. The School is conscious that there are other providers that have come in more recently, and although the University has a good foundation upon which to build, maintaining recognition from the wider community as a leader called for innovation and adoption of new tools and processes.

To help solve its problems, the School of Language Studies started using Wimba Voice. "Extramural students tend to feel more isolated than on-campus students," says Philip Williams, Professor and Head of the School of Language Studies. "There's often a domination of text-based media, compared with the learning experiences of internal students."

Via a PowerLink to Massey's WebCT courses that allows for easy access to Wimba Voice and a low learning curve, Massey has seen quick success with using Wimba Voice to teach languages online to its remote students. For instance, Williams already sees very significant improvements which address the issues such as:

Lecturers now provide recorded spoken assignments for students within WebCT courses. Lecturer recordings range from welcome messages to pronunciation examples of foreign words.

Forums within WebCT have been created for voice-based discussions with other students using the Wimba Voice Boards. Some classes are even importing pre-recorded media such as music, language lessons, and assessment into their Voice Boards, blending existing resources with new environments for interaction and response. Staff can now conduct coaching and assessments of student vocal skills via:

- Live conversations using Wimba Voice
- Recorded Wimba Voice Emails between lecturers and individual students
- Private threads in Wimba Voice Boards for one-on-one interaction

"A lot of staff use Wimba Voice Boards with public threads so students can send each other vocal posts. If there is assessment involved, we could use private threads in Voice Boards," says Williams. "Also, some students can be shy; but they might feel more at ease if other students aren't listening in."

According to O'Hara, another useful aspect of Wimba Voice Boards are that they fit into the busy schedule of the typical extra-mural student. These students are so busy with work or home and their studies that attending a three-hour lecture can seem out of the question – they need to find a way to squeeze in time. But with Wimba Voice Boards, students can get around to it when they have time. "There's also the opportunity for students to download posts from Voice Boards to listen to them on their iPod's," added Williams.

As for saving time and money, Massey now has the answer.



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O'Hara sums it up best when he discusses the

closeness his staff and students now feel when they collaborate online. "Remote students often study in isolation – they're not always connected with other people studying in their region," he says. "Many extramural students like the dynamic of being able to interact with other students, rather than just text-based interaction. Wimba takes communication to a new level. It makes the experience more real."

About Wimba

Wimba develops web-based collaboration software designed for online education, language learning and live interactive communications. Our collaborative applications enable learning professionals to fully embrace the new wave of teaching and learning opportunities afforded by the Internet; regardless of geographic location, bandwidth or operating system. Our classroom collaboration solutions enable educators to conduct live, online classes, meetings, office hours and other collaborations, and our language learning tools add oral interaction directly into course content, webpages, study groups and assessments. With simplicity and power, Wimba adds new dimensions to online, accessible education, enhancing the learning experience for both students and instructors.

