

# ***ThreadED: A Networked Learning Initiative***

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## **Abstract**

*ThreadED* is a networked learning initiative designed to promote connections between teaching staff, students and digitised resources, as well as to support teaching and learning at Massey University Institute of Education in New Zealand. *ThreadED* is framed around three strands (and related teacher and student competencies) identified by the Institute as important foci for their programmes: equity, cultural responsiveness and digital literacy. Resources and artefacts such as website links, articles, videos and apps are being identified, developed and catalogued at various levels of granularity, and linked to key competencies. A platform to archive and curate artefacts and resources has been developed, incorporating design principles that focus on maintaining autonomy and freedom of access to resources, for all teaching staff. Templates were also developed to provide support and guidelines for the annotation of each resource. These resources and artefacts will be used and curated by teaching staff for different teaching and learning purposes, across courses within the Institute of Education. A number of benefits are anticipated when the initiative begins operation in 2018. These include the adoption of the three key foci across all of the teaching programmes within the Institute of Education; the reduction in work and duplication associated with staff each producing the same content in different courses; staff having a greater awareness of each other's work and a strengthening of relationships; and the creation of synergies between staff that may lead to other opportunities in teaching and research. Finally, it is anticipated that *ThreadED* will enable personalised, self-directed and flexible teaching and learning practices by allowing teaching staff to select – from a range of quality learning objects – a resource that best meets individual needs and learning goals of the courses that are taught within the Institute. This paper introduces this initiative, discussing its key underlying principles as well as strategies used to facilitate staff's participation and contributions to a joint venture of knowledge creation. The initiative aims at reframing isolated academic practices at the Institute of Education towards an evolving participatory learning community, where everyone is able to build on each other's knowledge and expertise, sharing resources and practices related to equity, cultural responsiveness and digital literacy.

## **Keywords**

Equity in education; digital literacy; higher education; digitised teaching resources; networked learning;

## **ThreadED Rationale**

The impetus for the *ThreadED* initiative grew out of a number of key imperatives at the Institute of Education Massey University, New Zealand. An important impetus was to actualise three key foci that formed part of the Institute of Education's strategic plan and were to be woven throughout all of the teaching programmes. These were 'equity', 'cultural responsiveness' and 'digital literacy'. These three foci were identified as important areas to be addressed across all of the teaching courses within the Institute of Education. This was based on widely-recognised and reported evidence that education is a critical vehicle for achieving more equitable societies – societies where personal and social circumstances do not act as barriers to the achievement of human potential and societies where there is equitable access to the rewards and advantages that society can give. This is also in tune with networked learning principles, because of its focus on humanistic educational values, critical pedagogy and ethical considerations (McConnell et al., 2012; Jones, 2015). In New Zealand, Maori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) have historically been excluded and marginalised from and within the education system and have experienced more negative educational, social, economic and health outcomes than non-Maori. Ensuring that education systems are equitable is an important step to overcoming the disparity that

Maori experience. Similarly, the use of digital technologies has been identified as a critical component of learning and teaching in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (OECD, 2016).

While these three strands were identified as important foci for the programmes and courses at the Institute of Education, it was recognised that many staff would need support to develop their knowledge in these areas along with the confidence and competence to incorporate these into their teaching programmes. While there were ‘pockets’ of effective and innovative practice occurring within the Institute in relation to these three strands, these were isolated and not shared. *ThreadEd* provided a way to seed and facilitate a community of learning where not only could innovative digital learning and teaching tools and resources be shared across the three focus areas, but the practices associated with their effective use could also be communicated between the staff and implemented across courses. While e-literacy was a strand in its own right, it was anticipated that this initiative would encourage staff to take-up the use of digital technologies across all strands, and indeed, across all of their teaching, through sharing, discussion and modelling of exemplars. The notion of learning ‘with’, ‘from’ and ‘about’ each other is an important mantra for the initiative.

Further to these important rationales for the development of the *ThreadED* initiative was a desire to overcome duplication of staff effort in the development of teaching resources. As all staff were required to incorporate a focus on equity, e-literacy and cultural responsiveness into their courses, it did not make sense for staff to be developing these teaching resources in isolation from each other with the likelihood of duplication. *ThreadED* would maximise the administration effectiveness of this work. It was also envisaged that *ThreadED* would act as a catalyst for the visibility of staff members work allowing the development of stronger relationships between colleagues as they got to know about each other’s work.

## ThreadED as an Initiative

Networked Learning has been defined as “learning in which information and communications technology is used to promote connections: between one learner and other learners, between learners and tutors; between a learning community and its learning resources” (Goodyear et al., 2004, p.1). We see *ThreadED* as closely enacting networked learning design principles, as an initiative that places participation and collaboration at the centre; and where tools, tasks and people are brought together, with a view of encouraging people’s engagement in a shared knowledge creations (Goodyear & Carvalho, 2014).

The *ThreadEd* initiative is to be enacted through an online website of curated artefacts and developed to facilitate connections between staff, students and digitised resources at (University Name) Institute of Education in New Zealand. *ThreadEd* began as a project to create a shared digital library of resources to support the development of competencies in the three strands of (i) inclusive education (equity); (ii) cultural responsiveness (Tangata Aotearoa<sup>1</sup>); and (iii) digital. The intention being that artefacts can be reworked, curated and used in different ways but predominantly to support the teaching and learning across courses; for staff professional development; and for sharing through social media channels.

*ThreadEd* is designed as a collaborative initiative where teaching staff can contribute to and work together sharing digitised resources that can be used flexibly enabling individualised and responsive teaching. The initiative was conceptualised to allow staff to:

- *Work ‘smarter’* - by sharing digitised resources that can be tailored/curated and re-used for multiple courses and purposes (overcome duplication of looking for/producing content in different courses).
- *Work ‘together’* - creating more visibility and greater sharing of practices within the Institute of Education, across the wider university as well as nationally and internationally (where resources are open-source).
- *Work ‘outwards’* - generating greater awareness about the staff and work of the Institute of Education through sharing resources on social media eg. on Twitter, Blogs and other networking sites.
- *Work ‘flexibly’* - enabling individualised, self-directed and flexible teaching and learning practices, by selecting - from a range of quality learning objects - a resource that best meets individual needs and learning goals of the course.

Google Sites was chosen as an appropriate platform because of its easy access and use, the ability to archive and curate artefacts and resources, and the reasonable autonomy and freedom of access it affords for all teaching

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<sup>1</sup> Maori phrase for the people of New Zealand

staff. Templates have been developed that provide guidelines for the annotation of each resource. Resources are numbered and catalogued within and across strands.

An important aspect of the development of the initiative was consultation. Feedback was sought from all teaching staff in relation to key aspects of the initiative. This occurred via face-to-face meetings and an online survey. In particular, key consultation occurred with teaching programme leaders across the Institute.

Artefacts such as video clips, interviews, websites, articles, readings and apps are being developed at various levels of ‘granularity’ to be used and curated in various ways for different teaching and learning purposes. For example, a video of a staff member discussing their publication along with critical questions associated with the publication. Artefacts can then be embedded into different courses in ways that are appropriate to the level of course and/or assessment. The artefacts are organised around key competencies in relation to each of the strands.

## ThreadED Development

The project is currently in the initial stages of development. A core team made up of the authors of this paper developed the guiding competencies in relation to each of the strands. After some experimentation with a suitable digital environment, Google Sites was chosen as an appropriate platform. This is because of its easy access and use, the ability to archive and curate, and also because of its low cost. This platform allows for reasonable autonomy and freedom of access with all teaching staff within the Institute of Education encouraged to upload their own material. Templates have been developed that provide guidelines for the annotation of each resource. Resources are numbered and catalogued within and across strands.

Consultation has been an important part of the implementation of this initiative. The competencies related to each of the strands went out for consultation amongst the academic community within the Institute of Education, along with an online survey seeking feedback about the initiative in general, and specific aspects of development, content and delivery. Meetings were held with key programme leaders across the Institute of Education to discuss competencies, important resources and to ensure a sense of ownership and ‘buy in’ from these important members of the Institute’s academic community.

To ensure that the site remains vibrant, up-to-date and relevant, and to support staff who require help with its use, a part-time administrator has been appointed to carry out these roles.

## Conclusions

While the initiative will not be in operation until the beginning of 2018, it is anticipated that *ThreadEd* will enable staff at the Institute of Education to work ‘smarter’ by sharing digitised resources relevant to the core competencies associated with the Institute’s key foci of equity, e-learning and cultural responsiveness. These resources will be able to be tailored, curated and re-used for multiple courses and purposes, thus overcoming duplication in searching for, and producing content in different courses. The notion of ‘working together’ is also an important anticipated benefit where the work of staff will be more visible and where a greater awareness of each other’s work will be generated. It is hoped that this will strengthen relationships between staff and create synergies for other opportunities in teaching and research. Finally, it is anticipated that *ThreadED* will enable personalised, self-directed and flexible teaching and learning practices by allowing teaching staff to select – from a range of quality learning objects – a resource that best meets individual needs and learning goals of the courses that are taught within the Institute. The underpinning principles and core values of *ThreadEd* align with those of networked learning. Essentially, we hope that this initiative will help reframe isolated academic practices at the Institute of Education, towards more participatory practices, helping to create an evolving learning community, where staff are able to build on each other’s knowledge and expertise, sharing resources and practices related to equity, cultural responsiveness and digital literacy.

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