



Indigenous inclusion

Monday, 01 June 2009. Kath Walters

A small group of remote Aboriginal students has been given the opportunity to get online.

An important announcement during National Reconciliation Week (finishing June 3) was swamped by emergencies such as swine flu and the world's finances.

Four hundred indigenous students in remote areas of Australia joined the modern world of education when they received a free laptop under the One Laptop per Child program, the Australian arm of a global project to provide laptops to children in developing nations.

Students in three communities – Elcho Island and Newcastle Waters (both in the Northern Territory), and Rawa Community (in Western Australia) – received the computers.

The communications revolution of the past decade or two has taken a long time to penetrate the poorest parts of remote Australia, but its potential for creating jobs, uncovering talent, building wealth and solving problems of sickness and poverty are enormous.

Docker River is 150 kilometres past the Olgas in the Western corner of the NT. One radio-telephone frequency served a radius of about 600 kilometres (the days before mobile phones and PCs, way back in 1980). To phone out, I had to queue to use one phone in the community that connected to the single radio frequency. Then I had to sit and watch the red light that showed it was in use (by others within the 600 kilometres). As soon as the red light went off, I would pounce on the button to get the one line before anyone else. I set aside an hour or so whenever I had to make a call.

It's different now. Docker River, like Elcho Island and the others that receive the laptops have phone lines and computers. But families in these communities are still very poor.

Who really knows that opportunities will open up for the children who are able to connect to each other in the school room, and to the rest of the world through the program?

Certainly, they will be able to get to the end of their schooling without leaving their families. They will have access to a world of books and information previously undreamt of, at least one motivation for learning. They will meet and speak online to other children around the globe and be able to share their fabulous cultural knowledge and insights, adding greater meaning, connection and purpose to their lives.

What riches might Australia reap from such enormous change?

See www.laptop.org.au