

Interim report on the LEARNERS project

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Table of contents

Summary of the report	iii
Acknowledgements	ix
1. Context, aims and methodology	1
Project context.....	1
Building sustainable and inclusive communities	1
The role of C&IT in building sustainable and inclusive rural communities	1
The role of participatory planning and evaluation in making C&IT initiatives more sustainable and successful.....	2
Overview of this report	2
The LEARNERS project.....	3
Project components, aims and objectives	4
The trial of the LEARNERS process	4
Analysis of gender and other differences.....	4
Enhancing women's leadership and participation.....	5
Theories, methodologies and methods	6
Participatory action research.....	6
Participatory evaluation	7
Feminist theories and methodologies	8
The use of case studies	9
LEARNERS project methods and activities	10
Other project activities.....	10
LEARNERS project website	10
Email discussion lists.....	10
Analysis of census data.....	11
Project brochures, presentations and papers	11
Resources and training notes.....	11
Networking breakfast.....	11
2. The LEARNERS process and its implementation.....	12
Overview of the LEARNERS process.....	12
Key goals	12
Methods and approaches to participation and inclusion.....	12
Possible LEARNERS process cycles and steps	13
Selection of the communities	13
Activities to implement and evaluate the LEARNERS process and project.....	15
Development of evaluation indicators	15
Meetings with community members.....	15
Teleconferences	15
Initial information and planning workshops	15
Visioning workshop.....	16
Critical reflection workshops.....	16
Evaluation planning workshops	16
Evaluation data analysis and critical reflection workshop.....	17
Review and redesign of the LEARNERS process.....	17
Participatory action research workshop	17
Focus groups and interviews.....	17
Critical reflection and data analysis workshop.....	18
Case studies of the participating communities	18
Tara Shire case study.....	18
Stanthorpe Shire case study	20

3. Evaluation results and project impacts and outcomes.....	23
Evaluation results	23
Profile of project participants	23
Most valuable outcomes.....	25
Things that did not work so well	25
Suggested improvements.....	26
Critical analysis of key themes in the LEARNERS process trial.....	26
Framing the project as ‘community development’	27
Problems working with diverse community groups	28
The ideal versus the reality of implementing the process.....	29
Connecting with the process	30
Long-term sustainability of the process.....	31
Strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project.....	31
Strengths of the LEARNERS process.....	31
Limitations of the LEARNERS process.....	32
Strengths of the LEARNERS project.....	32
Limitations of the LEARNERS project.....	33
Project presentations and papers	33
How well the project objectives have been met	34
Future research.....	36
4. Conclusions	38
Bibliography.....	41
Appendix 1: Calendar of project activities	45
Appendix 2: Statistical data on the Tara and Stanthorpe communities.....	47
Appendix 3: Proposed timeframe of project activities August 2003 - October 2004.....	49
Tables and figures	
Figure 1: The LEARNERS process	14
Table 1: Profile of participants in key LEARNERS project activities.....	24
Table 2: Presentations on the LEARNERS project	33

Summary of the report

This report outlines the methods, activities and preliminary findings and outcomes of the LEARNERS project (*Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment and Rural Sustainability*). This project has three components that are closely interrelated:

1. The implementation and evaluation of the trial of a participatory process for the evaluation of rural community development initiatives that use new communication and information technologies (C&IT), labeled 'the LEARNERS process', in two participating communities.
2. A critical analysis of gender and other differences related to leadership, and levels of community participation, empowerment and inclusion.
3. The development, implementation and evaluation of strategies that aim to enhance and support women's leadership, participation and decision-making related to rural C&IT initiatives.

The project began in October 2001 and will be concluded in October 2004. A research team from Queensland University of Technology is conducting the project in partnership with people from the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires in South East Queensland and representatives from five government and industry partners. The project is funded by an Australian Research Council Strategic Partnerships with Industry - Research and Training grant and an Assisting Rural Women Leadership grant from the Office for Women, Queensland government.

This project appears to be fairly unique in that we have identified few other projects in Australia or overseas that are using participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation methodologies to evaluate community-based C&IT projects.

Overview of the LEARNERS process

The LEARNERS process is a flexible process that involves using a range of participatory and systems-based methods including:

- identifying and building on existing community strengths, assets and resources;
- continuous PAR cycles of planning, action, observing and reflecting;
- the use of participatory evaluation methods that enable ongoing learning and constant improvement of C&IT initiatives;
- a 'whole of community' approach to participation and assessment; and
- analysis of differences such as gender, age, ethnicity and levels of ability.

The key goals of the LEARNERS process are:

- The long-term sustainability of C&IT initiatives.
- Increased collaboration and cooperation between people and organisations from various sectors in rural communities.
- Enhanced community capacities in using participatory planning and evaluation methods.
- Increased community participation and inclusion in planning and evaluation processes.
- The development of learning communities.
- Giving value to empowering forms of leadership based on collaboration, sharing information, networking, encouraging participation, and supporting people.

How well the project objectives were met

The information provided in this report indicates that the objectives of the three interrelated project components have generally been met quite well. The following lists each key project objective and provides details about how well they have been met.

1. To further develop and evaluate the use of the LEARNERS process by community members in selected rural and regional communities in Queensland, taking into account gender differences in leadership, participation, empowerment and inclusion related to C&IT initiatives.

The LEARNERS process was further developed and critically evaluated through workshops, focus groups and interviews. Valuable learnings have been obtained about what works and what does not work so well and about the most effective, practical and realistic models for project leadership, community participation and community capacity building. Gender and other differences in leadership, participation and inclusion and contextual issues have been taken into account in this process. A more in depth analysis of this data will be undertaken during the remainder of the project.

2. To collaboratively develop evaluation processes and tools that would enable data on gender and other relevant differences such as age, ethnicity, and level of experience to be collected and analysed effectively

A range of evaluation methods, including feedback forms, focus group discussions and individual interviews were collaboratively developed and implemented on an ongoing basis. Workshop feedback forms enabled data on gender and other relevant differences such as age, occupation, and level of knowledge of participatory planning and evaluation to be collected and analysed effectively.

3. To undertake a critical evaluation of the methodology, activities, and materials used in the project, taking gender, age, rural/urban and other differences in capacity building, levels and experiences of participation, inclusion and empowerment, and the power relations enacted in the LEARNERS project into account

The ongoing evaluation identified several valuable outcomes of the workshops and other project activities. They include: the networking, leadership, and information sharing among the groups involved, and increased learning and skills development. The workshops were generally seen as effective, and participants appreciated the inclusive and participatory processes and the definite outcomes of later workshops.

However, some less effective aspects of the workshops were also identified. They included: the limited number and diversity of participants, some confusion about the LEARNERS project and process, the lack of direction and outcomes at some initial workshops, and time restrictions.

A complex range of social, cultural, environmental, organisational, and methodological factors affected the participation of a diversity of community members. Some factors, such as droughts, bushfires, and living in a remote location have a particular affect on community participation in rural areas. The time, energy and cost of participation are other important factors, as well as the time required to create interest and understanding. The time, energy and resources required to participate were not always available, given that many participants or interested community members were already actively involved in several community groups and projects. Problems related to time and resources also affected the research team's ability to successfully meet project objectives.

Other factors affecting the level of community participation and interest include:

- the perceived complexity of the information provided and the LEARNERS process itself;
- the extent to which the project's local coordinators could readily understand the process and communicate this to others;
- people's existing level of skills and knowledge;
- the perceived relevance of the project to different community members and groups; and
- the communication strategies used to involve different community groups

A more in-depth analysis of this evaluation data will be undertaken in the remainder of the project, which will include an analysis of the level and types of empowerment experienced, and the power relations enacted in the project.

4a. To develop and implement research and participation strategies and methods that aim to be empowering for a wide diversity of participants, particularly rural women.

4b. To develop and implement strategies to facilitate the active participation of a broad diversity of women in rural communities in the activities of the LEARNERS project, and in enhancing their formal and informal leadership activities associated with the LEARNERS project.

4c. To make adjustments to the LEARNERS process, and the project methodology and activities, as necessary to ensure they are meeting the diverse needs of the collaborating organisations and community members.

Community participation and training methods and activities were designed and implemented in collaboration with community participants and industry partners. Methods such as small group discussions were used which were effective in giving voice to participants (particularly less confident women) and in increasing skills, knowledge and understanding of participatory planning and evaluation. Based on feedback received, these methods and activities were redesigned to better meet community needs. Ongoing information, advice and support were provided to local project coordinators and participants. Feedback from Stanthorpe participants indicates that women's formal and informal leadership was enhanced to some extent. Feedback about this from Tara participants will be collected in August 2003.

The LEARNERS process was adapted for use by each of the participating communities, who chose to use different methods for obtaining community participation and interest. While the participation of women and men from somewhat diverse backgrounds was achieved, community participation was less inclusive than was aimed for. The project has mainly involved people in the community service or education and training sectors. There has been limited involvement from the business and technology sectors, farmers, and people involved in natural resource management. The majority of participants are relatively well-educated women who are already very active in their communities. Given the leadership roles that many rural women are playing in community development and in the uptake of new C&IT, this is not unexpected.

5. To facilitate the sharing of knowledge, information and feedback about the use of C&IT in community development, arising from the use of the LEARNERS process by the collaborating organisations and people.

Some new knowledge, information and awareness has been obtained about the use of C&IT in community development and the readiness of the communities involved to take

up new C&IT such as the Internet. New knowledge and awareness about women's leadership and participation in C&IT projects has also been developed. This information has been shared through meetings, workshops, focus groups, project papers and reports and other methods such as the project website and email lists. Valuable learnings from of a small-scale evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Group's use of 'GraniteNet', virtual community initiative, have been shared with others. A much larger-scale community-wide survey about the Tara Shire Community Website and IT training in the Shire has not yet been conducted.

6. To produce case studies, findings, and conclusions about the value of the LEARNERS process, and the methodology and methods used in this project for improving the sustainability and success of rural community development initiatives that use C&IT.

Detailed case studies on each community and the implementation and effects of the LEARNERS process, key themes and issues, and preliminary findings and conclusions are presented in this report. They demonstrate the complex factors that need to be considered when implementing community participation and capacity building processes. The strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project are identified. These suggest various factors that are important to increasing the sustainability and success of rural C&IT initiatives.

7. To undertake a preliminary assessment of the short-term impacts and effects of the project, at the level of the individual, the industry partner organisation, and the community, taking the organisational and community contexts, and gender and other relevant differences into account.

Data on the short-term impacts and effects of the project, on individual participants, industry partners, and the participating communities and community groups has been obtained. At this stage, more data has been obtained on the Stanthorpe participants and community than on the Tara participants and community.

Our preliminary results suggest that the project has had some success in building community capacities, generating community participation and empowerment and increasing communication, collaboration and cooperation among groups in both areas. Gender and other differences were taken into account in this assessment. Some participants have used their new skills, understanding, confidence and knowledge to benefit community groups. However, difficulties were experienced in obtaining a clear and widespread understanding of the LEARNERS process and the project.

Feedback on the project indicates that, despite the barriers and issues identified above, it has had several positive impacts on the participating communities, including:

- Increased linkages, networking, collaboration and information sharing between groups in the communities.
- Greater insight about the limitations and opportunities of C&IT for communities and the level of community openness to new C&IT initiatives.
- Identification of new ways of using C&IT to overcome communication and distance problems in Tara Shire.
- Some degree of individual, group and community empowerment.
- Some increase in women's participation and leadership in C&IT projects.
- The formation of a group of enthusiastic people in Stanthorpe who are actively working towards the development of a learning community in the region.

Fieldwork, to be conducted in Tara in August 2003, will include obtaining further feedback on the use and impacts of the LEARNERS process and other contextual information.

8. To make recommendations for future research and development work related to building community capacity and the long-term assessment of the use of C&IT in rural community development.

Research activities for the remainder of the project have been identified. They include developing new knowledge and information on:

- Methods of enhancing community involvement and ownership of initiatives and community leadership, particularly for people from various equity groups.
- Gender differences in leadership and strategies for enhancing women's participation in C&IT initiatives.
- Methods that would enable governments to more effectively work in partnership with people in rural communities.
- Increasing the long-term sustainability and success of community development initiatives that use C&IT.

The collaborative development of a comprehensive LEARNERS Resource Kit for rural communities is also proposed, subject to obtaining further funding. Recommendations related to building community capacity, the assessment of the use of C&IT in rural community development, and other issues will be collaboratively developed with project partners and participants during the latter stages of the project.

Conclusions

The ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in the two communities suggest several contradictions. We argue that in critically assessing the implementation of the process it is useful to consider the macro and micro level contexts of the project and the interrelationships between them. A significant challenge is to use the whole diversity of tacit knowledge of community members in research that embodies the principles of PAR and offers practical solutions to C&IT problems. A wide range of issues and barriers related to community participation and inclusion were identified that need to be considered in projects of this kind. However, the choice not to participate, or to only participate in a limited way, should be seen as one that is legitimate and rational.

In this type of action research, it seems important to involve those who are willing to engage in participatory evaluation processes, willing to reflect critically on evaluation results, and willing to use these learnings to redesign C&IT initiatives to better meet community needs and goals. An important learning is the need to consider the community members and groups that may be willing to be involved in the participatory planning and evaluation of C&IT projects, and interested in ongoing learning about the use of C&IT in community development. The relevance of the project to a diversity of community members, the capacity of various groups to participate, and the time, energy and resources required to obtain inclusive participation and to implement participation strategies also need to be considered. For example, some women in rural areas who are not in paid employment, and have many other family or community commitments, are often excluded. Other community members who have personal or business commitments may not have the time or energy to participate. The strategies used to obtain participation, and the participation process used, may also suggest that a high level of knowledge and literacy is needed to participate effectively, thus excluding some community members and groups.

While the LEARNERS project workshops initially attracted fairly large groups, only small groups continued to be actively involved in planning and conducting the evaluations. An alternative model for the LEARNERS process therefore appears to be a small core group, which is driving the process with a secondary group of interested stakeholders. The ideal is that the core group represents multiple community groups. However, while this model

appears to make the process more feasible for communities, it raises questions about the extent to which new skills, knowledge and ideas will be passed on to others.

The long-term sustainability of the use of the LEARNERS process is a key issue that will be addressed in the remainder of the project. A dedicated and funded local driver, with effective communication skills and networks seems essential. Our preliminary results also suggest that a more realistic and practical focus, and regular critical reflection and rigorous evaluation are essential for successful participatory projects in rural communities.

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1. Context, aims and methodology

Project context

Building sustainable and inclusive communities

The participation and inclusion of a broad diversity of community members and other stakeholders in planning, implementing and evaluating initiatives is often a key goal of community development projects. In Australia, community groups that are often targeted include women, people in rural and remote areas, indigenous people, and people of non-English speaking background.

Policies and programs have recently been instigated by governments and the not for profit sector in Australia and overseas that aim to increase 'community engagement', build 'community capacity' and develop 'learning communities' (Department of Premier and Cabinet, 2002; Faris, 2001; Mannion, 1996; Mission Australia, 2002). The aim of such programs is to facilitate sustainable social and economic development by building on existing community strengths and creating communities that are more inclusive, cooperative and self-reliant.

With the current shift towards a 'knowledge society', increasing community access to and use of new communication and information technologies (C&IT) such as the Internet for a wide range of purposes is often one of the major aims of community and economic development programs (Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Simpson et al, 2001). Given the key leadership roles of rural women in community development and in the adoption of new C&IT, they have been the major focus of Australian research in this field (Grace, Lundin and Daws, 1996; Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

However, research suggests that community participation processes that aim to be inclusive and empowering and involve the use of new C&IT raise many complex issues. A range of social, cultural, organisational, technological and economic factors have been found to limit the effectiveness of participatory processes involving diverse community members and groups (Boyce, 2001; Lennie, 2002). These factors include the time and costs involved, people's level of familiarity with participatory processes, and the different agendas and power-knowledge relations of the groups involved. In projects involving urban academics and bureaucrats and rural people and organisations, these factors are often highly relevant to the success or otherwise of strategies for empowerment and inclusion (Lennie, 2001).

The role of C&IT in building sustainable and inclusive rural communities

Governments, industry and communities are increasingly focusing on the role of new C&IT in sustainable community and economic development. The effective use of technologies such as email and the Internet is argued to have many potential benefits for sustainable development (Mansell and Wehn, 1998; Richardson, 1996; Simpson et al., 2001). This is particularly so in rural communities which are often disadvantaged in terms of access to new technologies. Initiatives such as electronic community networks, community websites and portals, and telecentres have recently been established in many rural and regional communities around Australia. The Federal Government's Networking the Nation program has funded a large number of these initiatives. Research has shown that, implemented in ways that meet community needs and goals, such initiatives can help rural communities to survive and prosper and to address the increasing 'digital divide' (Simpson, 2001; Simpson et al, 2001).

However, the use of C&IT raises many complex challenges and issues for community participation, inclusion and empowerment. Important issues for rural communities include:

- facilitating access to and adoption of new and rapidly evolving C&IT by all community groups and sectors;
- identifying the diverse C&IT access and training needs of community members and groups;
- securing ongoing funding and resources for initiatives;
- planning, developing and managing projects and initiatives; and
- evaluating the impacts of what are often quite complex projects and initiatives that use new communication technologies.

Research suggests that developing effective strategies for access and participation that take differences in community needs, and the whole range of local social, economic, cultural and technological factors into account can provide more equitable access to C&IT. Such an approach can also increase the overall sustainability and success of such initiatives (Simpson et al, 2001; The Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

The role of participatory planning and evaluation in making C&IT initiatives more sustainable and successful

The long-term sustainability and success of C&IT initiatives is often a key issue for rural communities, due to factors such as limited funding and resources. Enthusiastic 'champions' and volunteers are often relied on to successfully maintain these initiatives. Research suggests that:

- there is a significant need for more effective planning and coordination of C&IT initiatives and better cooperation among community groups to enable more effective use of funding, resources, local knowledge, ideas, skills and capacities (Lennie, Lundin and Simpson, 2000);
- there is a need to build the skills, knowledge and capacities of community members and service providers in planning and evaluating community development initiatives;
- an ongoing process of planning and evaluating community development initiatives can help to achieve long-term sustainability; and
- participatory evaluation methodologies can help to enhance the long-term sustainability and success of programs through building community capacities, and increasing community ownership, inclusion and participation (Brunner and Guzman, 1989; Papineau and Kiely, 1996).

Overview of this report

This report outlines the activities and preliminary outcomes of LEARNERS project (*Learning, Evaluation, Action & Reflection for New technologies, Empowerment and Rural Sustainability*). This research project is evaluating the use of a participatory process for the evaluation of rural community development initiatives that use new C&IT by community groups in the Stanthorpe and Tara Shires, two rural communities in South East Queensland. This project appears to be fairly unique in that we have identified few other projects in Australia or overseas that are using participatory action research (PAR) and participatory evaluation methodologies to evaluate community-based C&IT projects.

Following a summary of the project context, this first chapter outlines the project, and details its aims and objectives, methodology and methods, and other key project

activities. Chapter 2 provides an overview of the LEARNERS process, describes the criteria used to select the two case study communities, summarises the main activities used to implement and evaluate the LEARNERS process, and presents case studies of the implementation and use of the LEARNERS process in the Stanthorpe and Tara Shires. Chapter 3 outlines results from the ongoing evaluation of project activities, details the themes and issues that have emerged from the trial, summarises the strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project, lists presentations and papers on the project and related research, reviews how well the project objectives have been met, and identifies future research and analysis to be undertaken. Chapter 4 presents some conclusions about the project's issues and outcomes to date.

The LEARNERS project

The LEARNERS project grew out of pilot research undertaken by June Lennie, Roy Lundin and Lyn Simpson at Queensland University of Technology that included:

- an extensive literature search and review;
- the development of a participatory planning and evaluation framework;
- the collection of feedback on the framework from people in several rural and regional communities in Queensland; and
- preparing a case study of C&IT initiatives and evaluation and planning processes in a Queensland rural town (see Lennie, Lundin and Simpson, 2000a and 2000b).

The original framework developed in the pilot project was refined as part of the current research project and is undergoing ongoing revisions, based on feedback from community participants and other stakeholders.

The LEARNERS project began in October 2001 and will conclude in October 2004. The project is being conducted by a research team from the Service Leadership and Innovation Research Program and the Creative Industries Research and Applications Centre, QUT, in partnership with community groups from the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires and representatives from the following government and industry partners:

- Learning Network Queensland (LNQ)
- Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS)
- Department of Natural Resources and Mines (NR&M)
- Legal Aid Queensland (LAQ)
- Office for Women.

The project is funded by an Australian Research Council Strategic Partnerships with Industry - Research and Training grant and an Assisting Rural Women Leadership grant from the Office for Women, Queensland government.

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Project components, aims and objectives

The LEARNERS project has three components that are closely interrelated:

1. The implementation and evaluation of the trial of the LEARNERS process in two participating communities.
2. A critical analysis of gender and other differences related to leadership, and levels of community participation, empowerment and inclusion.
3. The development, implementation and evaluation of strategies that aim to enhance and support women's leadership, participation and decision-making related to rural C&IT initiatives.

The trial of the LEARNERS process

The overall aim of this major component of the project is to further develop the LEARNERS process and to evaluate the impacts of the use of this process by two rural communities. This involves developing case studies that aim to identify the factors that make community initiatives that use C&IT more sustainable and successful. In the long-term, the project aims to enable other rural communities to access and effectively use the LEARNERS process.

The seven key objectives of this project component are to:

- further develop and evaluate the use of the LEARNERS process by community members in selected rural and regional communities in Queensland;
- undertake a critical evaluation of the methodology, activities, and materials used in the project, taking gender, age, rural/urban and other differences into account;
- make adjustments to the process, and the project methodology and activities, as necessary to ensure they are meeting the diverse needs of the collaborating organisations and community members;
- facilitate the sharing of knowledge, information and feedback about the use of C&IT in community development, arising from the use of the LEARNERS process by the collaborating organisations and people;
- undertake a preliminary assessment of the short-term impacts and effects of the project, taking the organisational and community contexts, and gender and other relevant differences into account;
- produce case studies, findings, and conclusions about the value of the LEARNERS process, and the methodology and methods used in this project for improving the sustainability and success of rural community development initiatives that use C&IT; and
- make recommendations for future research and development work related to building community capacity and the long-term assessment of the use of C&IT in rural community development.

Analysis of gender and other differences

This project component aims to conduct an evaluation and impact assessment of the LEARNERS process and the methodology and methods used in the LEARNERS project, using a critical feminist approach. This research is being undertaken by June Lennie in collaboration with project participants and stakeholders as part of her ARC Postdoctoral Fellowship.

Taking gender and other relevant differences into account, this research is focussing on leadership in community C&IT initiatives, the extent and quality of participants' capacity building experiences and their participation in the LEARNERS project, and their levels of empowerment and inclusion. From this analysis, new knowledge and innovative

strategies are being developed that could have important implications for rural women's leadership and participation in the field of community C&IT projects.

The five key objectives of this component of the project are to:

- further develop the LEARNERS process, taking into account gender differences in leadership, participation, empowerment and inclusion related to C&IT initiatives;
- collaboratively develop evaluation processes and tools that would enable data on gender and other relevant differences such as age, ethnicity, and level of experience to be collected and analysed effectively;
- develop and implement research and participation strategies and methods that aim to be empowering for a wide diversity of participants, particularly rural women;
- critically evaluate the methodology and activities of the LEARNERS project, focussing on gender differences in capacity building, levels and experiences of participation, inclusion and empowerment, and the power relations enacted in the LEARNERS project;
- undertake a preliminary assessment of the short-term impacts and effects of the LEARNERS project, at the level of the individual, the industry partner organisation, and the community, taking gender and other differences into account.

Enhancing women's leadership and participation

This aspect of the project is closely related to the postdoctoral fellowship study outlined above. It involves developing, implementing and evaluating strategies that aim to enhance and support women's leadership, participation and decision-making related to community C&IT initiatives. Funding for this project component has been obtained from January 2002 - December 2003 through an Assisting Rural Women Leadership grant from the Office for Women, Queensland government.

The objectives of this project component are to:

- develop and implement strategies to facilitate the active participation of a broad diversity of women in rural communities in the activities of the LEARNERS project, and in enhancing their formal and informal leadership activities associated with the LEARNERS project;
- develop new knowledge and facilitate awareness and recognition of the new forms of leadership, associated with women, that are anticipated to help sustain rural and regional communities in Queensland;
- conduct training, and provide ongoing advice, assistance, information and support to rural women's organisations and programs and individual rural women involved in the trial of the LEARNERS process;
- undertake ongoing development and improvement of the LEARNERS process, taking into account gender differences in leadership, participation, empowerment and inclusion;
- critically evaluate the strategies, methods and activities of this project, focussing on differences in women's capacity building experiences and in their levels and experiences of participation, inclusion and empowerment;
- undertake an assessment of the short-term impacts and effects of the project's strategies, methods and activities.

An overall assessment of how well the objectives of the above project components have been met is provided in Chapter 3.

Theories, methodologies and methods

The LEARNERS project research team has taken an interdisciplinary approach that draws on a number of theoretical and methodological frameworks, including:

- participatory action research
- participatory evaluation
- feminist theories and methodologies
- case study methodology.

Participatory action research

The main methodology used in this project is participatory action research (PAR) (McTaggart, 1991; Seymour-Rolls and Hughes, 1998; Wadsworth, 1998). PAR seeks to include and involve a diversity of community members and organisations and other stakeholders, to incorporate local knowledge and ideas, and to enhance democracy and individual, group and community empowerment. PAR is a political process because it involves people making changes together that also affect others (McTaggart, 1991, p.177).

PAR aims to reflect and take into account a diversity of perspectives, thereby revealing the complexity of the agendas, needs and issues in a local community or organisation. To be successful, PAR requires good collaborative relationships, open communication and mutual trust and understanding between those involved. Critical reflection is a crucial step in each PAR cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting. Regular critical reflection ensures the development of effective and appropriate solutions and actions that lead to desirable improvements and change.

PAR encourages active involvement by community members and other stakeholders in the design and conduct of projects, and supports capacity building processes. This ensures that the research closely matches the needs, policies, plans and objectives of the people and organisations involved in the project. In the LEARNERS project, community participants and industry partners are encouraged to assist in identifying:

- project activities and processes that best meet community needs
- the strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process
- key factors involved in making rural community development projects that use new C&IT more sustainable and successful, and
- barriers to community participation and empowerment.

Through activities such as critical reflection workshops, the LEARNERS project is using PAR as a means of creating new knowledge about community leadership, participation and inclusion and the role of C&IT in sustainable development. Issues related to gender and other differences and power relations are being identified and mutual learning has taken place.

Like all participatory methodologies, PAR has certain limitations. They include:

- the greater time, energy and commitment required to undertake activities compared with other research and evaluation approaches; and
- the high degree of trust needed between those involved that can take some time to develop.

In addition, when people with different levels of power, status, influence and knowledge come together, the ideal of participation becomes problematic (Lennie, 2001; McTaggart, 1991). To reduce power and knowledge differences, the LEARNERS project has attempted to use inclusive communication and participation processes that enable all

participants to have a say in planning and decision-making, and that draw on the existing knowledge, experiences and skills of participants.

Participatory evaluation

Participatory evaluation (PE) methodologies can be particularly useful in assessing complex community-based projects such as those involving the use of new C&IT. In a PE, the evaluators are the stakeholders or participants involved in a project. Researchers or other professional staff act as methodological consultants in the evaluation, and decisions about the evaluation are usually jointly made by stakeholders and researchers. Evaluation is seen as an ongoing learning process and an everyday activity that anyone with appropriate training can do, not just the 'experts'.

The PE method includes:

- community participation in designing and conducting evaluations;
- using a range of methods, as appropriate, such as observations, interviews and feedback questionnaires; and
- reflecting the diverse perspectives of those involved in or affected by the initiative when reporting evaluation learnings and results.

For an evaluation to be considered participatory Rebien (1996, p.160) suggests that stakeholders need to participate in at least three evaluation phases: 'designing terms of reference, interpreting data, and using evaluation information'. The LEARNERS research team and partners have assisted the evaluation coordination groups in Tara and Stanthorpe to identify the C&IT projects to be evaluated, the key evaluation questions, and the methods to be used. The researchers have also facilitated a workshop in which the Stanthorpe coordination group analysed evaluation data and critically reflected on the evaluation process they used.

As well as the use of PE by the participating communities, the LEARNERS research team is using PE methods to conduct an ongoing evaluation of the project's methods and activities, such as workshops, email lists and focus groups. An 'open inquiry' approach to this evaluation (Wadsworth, 1997) has been adopted. This approach allows maximum flexibility and creativity and enables the complexity and richness of the data to be more fully represented and understood from a diversity of perspectives. The process involves the convergence, or triangulation, of different sources and types of data, different data collection and inquiry methods, and using various strategies for the validation of interpretations and conclusions.

Methods used to undertake the evaluation of the LEARNERS project's methods and activities have included:

- the development of evaluation indicators and outcomes;
- workshop feedback forms;
- questionnaires providing background information on participants;
- group discussions;
- semi-structured individual interviews;
- feedback provided by email messages;
- participant observation; and
- fieldwork diary entries.

The use of multiple methods ensures rigorous validation and the triangulation of data from multiple sources and perspectives.

Strengths and limitations of participatory evaluations

Participatory evaluation methodologies have been found to enhance the long-term sustainability and success of programs through building community capacities and the inclusion of diverse stakeholders in decision making. These methodologies can facilitate interaction between people, enable ongoing learning, foster a sense of 'ownership' of initiatives, and potentially produce community and individual empowerment (Brunner and Guzman, 1989; Papineau and Kiely, 1996).

However, PE has certain theoretical weaknesses related to the 'confusion surrounding the participation concept itself' and the conceptual weakness of participation (Rebien, 1996, pp. 154-155). In addition, the concept of empowerment is often used in uncritical ways by those undertaking participatory evaluations. Other limitations include:

- the time and resources needed to train those involved;
- difficulties with involving a representative group of people in the evaluation;
- participants' varying levels of skills and commitment to the process;
- the varying levels of access to resources to undertake evaluations; and
- the conflicting perspectives and agendas that can be more apparent in PEs, compared with traditional evaluation methodologies.

Feminist theories and methodologies

A key component of the LEARNERS project is an analysis of gender and other differences related to leadership, and levels of participation, empowerment and inclusion.

Taking gender into account in C&IT research

LEARNERS project researchers view technology as a social process. This implies that technology assessments need to consider the social, economic, political, organisational and technical contexts within which technologies are implemented and the interrelationships between them (Lennie, 2002; Morgall, 1993; Simpson et al, 1998; Simpson et al, 1999). Analysis of differences such as gender, rurality, age and occupation is an important element of this research. However, gender issues have often been neglected in research into the use and implementation of new C&IT in rural areas (Grace et al 1996; Rural Women and ICTs Team, 1999). In addition, many technology assessments fail to recognise that technologies are socially constructed and treat technology as neutral and value free (Morgall, 1993). As a result, the knowledge, values and needs of various groups of women can be excluded from the design and implementation of communication technologies (Frissen, 1992; Morgall, 1993). This has social equity implications in that it can result in women's reduced access to C&IT.

An important issue for the LEARNERS project is that, due to their central role as communicators and networkers, rural women are particularly affected by barriers in access to new C&IT. In turn, this can affect rural women's ability to effectively participate in planning, evaluations and decision making related to the use of C&IT in achieving sustainable community development.

Enhancing rural women's leadership in C&IT initiatives

Rural women are making significant contributions to the social and economic development and sustainability of their communities through their work on family farms, their professional roles such as teachers and nurses, through establishing small businesses, and through unpaid community work (Alston, 1995). Improved access to C&IT is seen as greatly

enhancing rural women's ability to carry out these diverse activities, which are vital to the survival of declining rural communities (Rural Women and ICTs Team, 1999).

Research into Queensland rural women's use of communication technologies for accessing information and for networking (Grace et al 1996) found that rural women are usually the major nodes in communications networks for their communities and their families. They are heavily dependent on C&IT for a range of business, educational, community development and networking purposes. Rural women have been found to be major users and adopters of new C&IT (Moyal, 1989; Grace et al 1996). A recent QUT research project concluded that women's role as 'pioneers' in using the Internet (despite many technical and other barriers) may be a significant factor in Internet uptake in rural and remote areas (Rural Women and ICTs Team, 1999).

Given the possibility that innovative applications of C&IT are likely to play an important role in revitalising rural communities, the involvement of rural women in leadership and decision-making related to these technologies is argued to be of vital importance. The LEARNERS project therefore incorporates the use of a participatory feminist evaluation methodology that aims to be empowering and inclusive by giving voice to a diversity of participants (particularly women), and by taking their particular contexts, needs and lived experiences into account.

Critically evaluating claims for empowerment

Feminist critiques suggest that research which aims to be empowering can have contradictory effects and that claims that research has produced empowerment require closer examination (Anderson, 1996; Gore, 1992; Lennie, 2002; Lennie et al., 2003). This entails adopting a more critical and self-reflexive approach and using more rigorous methods to evaluate such claims. The LEARNERS project is developing and applying such methods, building on research undertaken by June Lennie as part of her PhD study (Lennie, 2001).

Feminist theories of the gendered nature of power, knowledge and discourse are being drawn on. These theories can highlight the contradictions and unintended negative effects of participatory methodologies that are often overlooked. This component of the LEARNERS project aims to contribute to the development of more rigorous and conceptually stronger community participation processes and participatory evaluation methodologies.

The use of case studies

Case studies are being used to describe and analyse the implementation and effects of the LEARNERS project in the two participating communities, Stanthorpe and Tara, and to provide important contextual information on these communities. Case studies have been effectively used in evaluation research of this type (see, for example, Milio, 1996), and can be valuable for illustrating the impacts and effects of community development projects on participants, organisations and communities.

One of the strengths of the case study method is the use of multiple methods and multiple sources of data, including interviews, questionnaires, reports and other documentary evidence (Yin, 1994). This enhances the 'trustworthiness' of the findings and can allow a more complex analysis that takes the underlying social, cultural, technical and economic contexts, and relevant factors such as the policy environment, into account.

LEARNERS project methods and activities

A range of qualitative and quantitative research and community participation methods has been used in the project, including:

- meetings and workshops;
- teleconferences and videoconferences;
- focus group discussions;
- semi-structured individual interviews;
- feedback forms and questionnaires;
- participant observation;
- data collected via email and via the project's online discussion group;
- literature reviews; and
- definitions of key concepts.

A calendar of project activities is provided in Appendix 1 and further details about these project activities are provided in Chapter 2.

Data analysis has included the use of the SPSS program, and critical reflection workshops with industry partners and community members.

Other project activities

The project has involved a number of other activities, including:

- the creation and regular updating of the LEARNERS project website;
- the establishment of a learners email discussion list for community participants, research team and industry partners;
- the establishment of an email discussion list for the project steering group;
- analysis of statistical data from the 2001 census;
- presentations about the project at conferences and seminars;
- preparing brochures, publications and papers on the project;
- preparing and disseminating workshop training notes and other information; and
- organising and hosting a major networking breakfast.

LEARNERS project website

The LEARNERS project website (www.learners.bus.qut.edu.au) presents an overview of the project and the LEARNERS process, introduces the communities, key community contacts, the project research team and the industry partners. The site includes links to other relevant websites, access to project resources and publications, notes from workshops, and updates on the project. Photographs from project workshops are included on the site, which can be accessed with or without graphics, for those with slow line speeds.

Email discussion lists

Community members, project partners and members of the research team are encouraged to participate in the learners discussion list, which was established in August 2002. This list currently includes ten members from the Stanthorpe Shire, nine members from the Tara Shire, five industry partner representatives and the five members of the QUT research team. An email discussion list for the project steering group was also established in March 2002 to share information and organise project activities.

Analysis of census data

To obtain relevant statistical data on the participating communities, Australian Bureau of Statistics data from the 2001 census was analysed and reports prepared (see Van Vuuren and Lennie, 2002 and 2003). This activity included analysis of data on home computer and Internet use, population size and general characteristics, industries and employment, and educational status. A summary of this statistical data is provided in Appendix 2.

Project brochures, presentations and papers

Brochures on the project have been prepared and disseminated to participants and other interested people. A number of presentations on the project have been made at local and national seminars, meetings and conferences. Papers on the project have also been published on conference websites and on the LEARNERS project website. Further details about these presentations and papers are provided in Chapter 3.

Resources and training notes

Relevant information and resources, including addresses of useful Internet sites were provided to workshop participants. The following training notes were also prepared to assist the process of community capacity building:

- Project Information Sheet No.1: Brainstorming
- Project Information Sheet No.2: Evaluation and impact assessment
- Project Information Sheet No.3: Small group facilitation
- Project Information Sheet No.4: Focus groups
- Project Handout: Evaluating GraniteNet – three possible models.

These notes were disseminated at project workshops in Stanthorpe and Tara and published on the LEARNERS project website.

Networking breakfast

A major networking breakfast was held on 17 June 2003 at Learning Network Queensland's South Brisbane premises. This activity was funded and supported by three of the industry partners (FaCS, LNQ and NR&M). The breakfast introduced the LEARNERS process to representatives from a range of government and community organisations. The latest large screen projection system and Internet based audio and video conferencing system linked breakfast participants at LNQ Centres in the Tara and Stanthorpe communities. Small group discussions at the three sites raised a wide range of issues related to successful IT projects in rural communities. Twenty-five people participated in Brisbane, eight participated in Stanthorpe and seven people took part in Tara. A meeting involving five steering group members was later held to critically reflect on the event and plan follow up actions.

2. The LEARNERS process and its implementation

This chapter summarises the LEARNERS process, the methods used to select the case study communities, the process used to review and redesign the LEARNERS process, and the key project activities. Case studies of the Tara and Stanthorpe Shire communities and the implementation and use of the LEARNERS process by groups in these communities are then presented.

Overview of the LEARNERS process

Key goals

The key goals of the LEARNERS process are:

- The long-term sustainability of C&IT initiatives.
- Increased collaboration and cooperation between people and organisations from various sectors in rural communities.
- Enhanced community capacity in using participatory planning and evaluation methods.
- Increased community participation and inclusion in planning and evaluation processes.
- The development of learning communities.
- Giving value to empowering forms of leadership based on collaboration, sharing information, networking, encouraging participation, and supporting people.

Methods and approaches to participation and inclusion

The LEARNERS process involves using a range of participatory and systems-based methods that include:

- identifying and building on existing community strengths, assets and resources;
- continuous PAR cycles of planning, action, observing and reflecting;
- the use of participatory evaluation methods that enable ongoing learning and constant improvement of C&IT initiatives;
- a 'whole of community' approach to participation and assessment; and
- analysis of differences such as gender, age, ethnicity and levels of ability.

Research suggests that taking a 'whole of community' approach is important to sustainable community and economic development. This approach often considers the linkages between the social, economic and environmental systems in a community ('the triple bottom line'). In the LEARNERS process this involves:

- including a broad diversity of people from different sectors of the community in planning and evaluating initiatives and ensuring their voices are listened to and heard;
- encouraging collaboration and cooperation between community groups and organisations from a diversity of sectors; and
- assessing the direct and more indirect impacts of C&IT initiatives on different groups and sectors of the community, using a systems approach to analysis.

This approach highlights the interconnectedness of the social, cultural, economic, political, environmental and technological systems and the complexity of these systems within a community.

Possible LEARNERS process cycles and steps

The LEARNERS process is very flexible and can be used in a variety of ways that meet community needs and goals. The following are some of the possible cycles and steps involved:

- Identification of key people such as community leaders and 'champions', and other interested people in the community, and forming an action research and evaluation group.
- Assessment of existing community resources such as the number and location of computers with public access to the Internet, information about community skills and needs, and the community's learning needs in relation to the use of new C&IT and the LEARNERS process.
- Learning activities to effectively use the LEARNERS process and to increase awareness of the benefits of new C&IT. These learning activities could include workshops on conducting interviews and focus groups and preparing questionnaires.
- Collaborative design and evaluation of the C&IT initiatives and the implementation of the evaluation as a continuous activity. This could include assessing the impacts of the initiatives on various sectors of the community.
- Sharing learnings of success factors and evaluation results with others in the community.
- Based on the learnings from the evaluation, conducting a review of the initiatives and redesigning them to better match community needs.

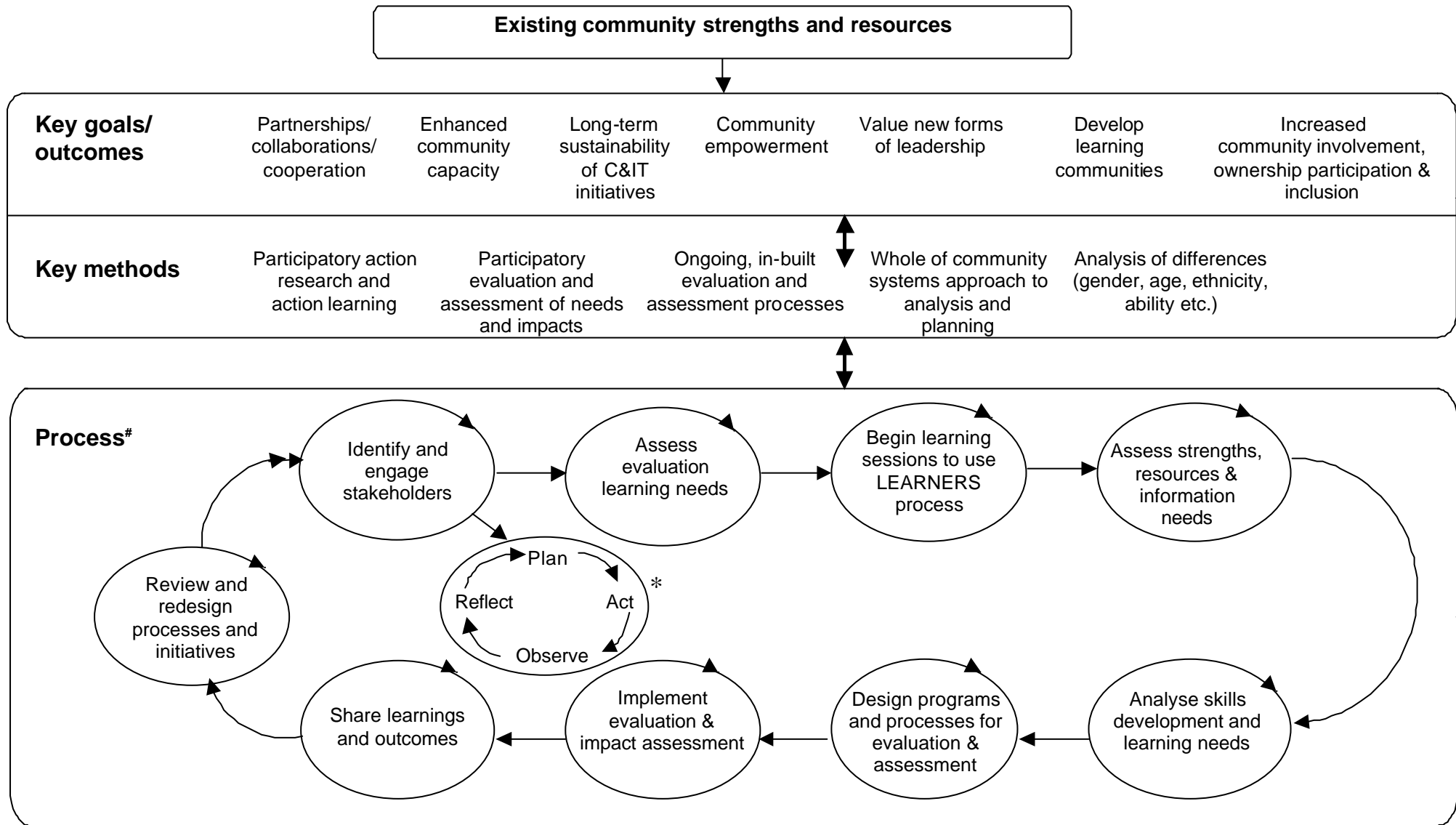
Each of the LEARNER cycles includes action research cycles of planning, action, observing and reflecting. These cycles are overlapping and can be constantly repeated. This ongoing process involves working on different cycles in various sequences, as appropriate, as new learnings emerge, new community needs and issues are identified, and new initiatives are implemented in the community. Figure 1 summarises the LEARNERS process and the anticipated outcomes of using the process.

Selection of the communities

The original funding proposal to the ARC envisaged that three communities would be selected for participation in the trial of the LEARNERS process. However, due to a shortfall in the funding requested, a decision was made to select two communities for the trial. These communities were selected on the basis of the following criteria:

- The existence of current community development initiatives that use C&IT and that are of interest to the project's industry partners.
- Local interest in using the LEARNERS process and a willingness to commit to the project until October 2004.
- The availability of enthusiastic and interested local coordinators who have the time and capacity to help organise activities, assist in identifying participants, and provide ongoing feedback on project activities.
- Communities are diverse in terms of geographical location, economic base, social, cultural and ethnic structure, population size, and levels of community capacities in planning and evaluation.
- Farmers, as well as people living in local townships, could be included.
- About a two to three hour drive from Brisbane.
- The presence of workshop and meeting facilities owned by industry partner organisations.

Figure 1: The LEARNERS Process



All of these steps do not have to be followed and do not have to be undertaken in this sequence. They represent activities that could potentially be undertaken by stakeholders and participants.

* Each of the steps involves a cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting

Five possible communities were suggested by the project's industry partners. Their suitability was then assessed, based on the above criteria. Discussions were also held with key community contacts in the five communities to assess their level of interest in the project and their ability to coordinate local activities and commit to the project until October 2004. The outcome of this process was that the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires were selected for participation in the project in May 2002.

Activities to implement and evaluate the LEARNERS process and project

This section summarises the key activities involved in implementing and evaluating the LEARNERS process and project in the Tara and Stanthorpe communities. Notes on workshops, teleconferences and meetings were distributed to all participants in these activities.

Development of evaluation indicators

- Draft indicators for the evaluation of the trial of the LEARNERS process and for the evaluation of the methodology and methods used in the project were developed.
- Feedback on these draft indicators was obtained from industry partners.
- The evaluation indicators and outcomes were revised based on this feedback and were used to inform the construction of evaluation methods and tools.

Meetings with community members

- QUT team members held an initial meeting with community leaders to discuss the LEARNERS project, its aims and objectives, and how it could benefit the community.
- Local committees were formed, comprising interested community members who were invited along to a meeting and community workshop.
- Members of these committees have conducted workshops and information sessions independently in their communities to create interest and motivation.
- Information about the benefits that can be gained from the project has been shared.

Teleconferences

- Community project leaders and committee members have taken part in several steering group meetings via teleconference and videoconference.
- Teleconferences have also been held with community coordinators to plan workshops and meetings in the communities.
- Community participants have provided feedback and updates on local project activities.

Initial information and planning workshops

An initial workshop was held in each community that aimed to introduce the project and the LEARNERS process and to plan future actions.

- QUT team members provided an overview of the LEARNERS project and process
- Community members shared knowledge on other community projects (particularly those involving C&IT), their interest in the LEARNERS project and the benefits they expected from it.
- Small groups of community participants discussed and evaluated a hypothetical which illustrated how the LEARNERS process could be used in a community and

the benefits it could offer. Different hypotheticals were used in Tara and Stanthorpe.

- Each small group shared their evaluation of the hypothetical, which included the pros and cons of the process and the project illustrated, and how the process could be transferred to their local community.
- A brainstorming session of possible next steps was facilitated by community members and a QUT team member which provided a guide for actions to be taken.
- Participants were provided a folder of relevant information and resources.

Visioning workshop

- This workshop, held in Stanthorpe in October 2002, aimed to develop vision statements for the Granite Belt as a LifeLong Learning Community.
- It was facilitated by community participants and QUT team members.
- Small groups discussed the desired components of a vision statement and each group developed a vision statement. This information was then shared with the whole group.
- Community participants facilitated a general discussion and established actions to be taken.
- Three community participants later formulated a vision statement based on the workshop discussions and the statements developed at this workshop.

Critical reflection workshops

Community coordinators, representatives from Learning Network Queensland and the Department of Family and Community Services and QUT research team members participated in a major critical reflection workshop on 16 December 2002. The workshop, held at Learning Network Queensland, Toowoomba, was independently facilitated by Christine King, from the Department of Primary Industries in Toowoomba.

- The aim of this workshop was to critically review the LEARNERS project in light of its aims and objectives; assess how well the project was going; and to consider how the project could be improved and how the LEARNERS process could better meet its objectives and community needs.
- QUT team members presented the objectives of the project and the LEARNERS process and initial project outcomes.
- Community coordinators provided feedback on project activities in their local community.
- Small group discussions were held to discuss how well the project was going and to suggest improvements. A summary of these discussions was presented to all workshop participants.
- The learnings from the workshop guided the project in its second year and helped the project better meet community needs and provide tangible benefits.

A further critical reflection workshop on the project was held in February 2003 as part of a steering group meeting. This identified outcomes of the project for the industry partner representatives and organisations.

Evaluation planning workshops

In February and March 2003, workshops were held in Tara and Stanthorpe to begin planning the evaluations of the C&IT projects that had been selected by the communities for evaluation using the LEARNERS process. The workshop also aimed to develop a more in-depth understanding of participatory evaluation methods.

- An industry partner and QUT team member led a brainstorming session where community participations discussed why the evaluation of the C&IT projects would be conducted.
- A community participant and a QUT team member explained the local projects and participatory evaluation methods and a QUT team member facilitated a session that identified some of the key questions that need to be addressed in planning the evaluations.
- Evaluation questions and goals were formulated by community members and evaluation methods proposed.
- A list of activities, some on timelines, were developed by community participants with assistance from the QUT team and industry partners.
- An industry partner representative led a workshop evaluation session in Stanthorpe while participants completed workshop feedback forms in Tara.

Evaluation data analysis and critical reflection workshop

In May 2003, a QUT team member facilitated a workshop with the Stanthorpe evaluation coordination group to review the evaluation data collected, identify key themes and issues, and consider ways in which the initiative being evaluated could be redesigned to address the issues identified.

- Community participants collaboratively analysed the results of an email survey that was used to conduct the evaluation and identified from a list of suggested improvements, the top five actions that could help improve the initiative.
- Participants critically reflected on the evaluation process, set priorities and brainstormed a set of actions to be taken and who would take them.
- The QUT team and industry partner representatives provided feedback and suggestions on the evaluation process and facilitated the action planning process.

Review and redesign of the LEARNERS process

Participatory action research workshop

An initial workshop was held in March 2002 that brought together industry partner representatives and the QUT research team. The aim of this workshop was to use PAR to critically assess the original framework developed in the pilot project. QUT team members made a presentation on PAR, outlined the framework, facilitated a discussion on follow-up actions and conducted an evaluation of the workshop. Industry partner representatives facilitated small group discussions and critical reflections on the workshop discussions. The small groups discussed the appropriateness of:

- the key concepts and values underpinning the framework;
- the key goals and outcomes of the framework, and
- the cycles and steps involved in using the framework.

The insights gained from the workshops discussions were used to refine the framework, which was later named the LEARNERS process.

Focus groups and interviews

Two focus group discussions were held with community participants in Stanthorpe in May 2003 which aimed to obtain feedback from community participants on the issues of leadership and participation in the community, the key LEARNERS concepts, and the LEARNERS process. Participants were first asked to complete a questionnaire, designed to help facilitate some of the discussion. This included questions about the key LEARNERS concepts, and the strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process. A

QUT team member facilitated the discussion. Two industry partner representatives observed the focus groups and assisted in taking notes on the discussion. Six community participants (all women) took part in the first focus group and four participants (two women and two men) took part in the second focus group.

In-depth semi-structured individual interviews were also held with four women participants in Stanthorpe in May 2003. These included questions put to the focus groups and additional questions about women's leadership and participation, and the impacts and effects of the project on the interviewee.

Similar focus groups and interviews are planned to be held in Tara in August 2003.

All of the focus group discussions and interviews were recorded on audiotape and then transcribed. This data will later be coded and analysed using the NVivo program.

Critical reflection and data analysis workshop

A workshop to undertake a preliminary analysis of issues arising from the LEARNERS project was held on 12 June 2003. Three QUT team members and an industry partner participated in the workshop which drew on critical feedback and comments provided by Nancy Entwistle, an industry partner representative from FaCS. Participants discussed a range of issues related to the LEARNERS methodology and summarised the strengths and weaknesses of the project and the LEARNERS process.

Case studies of the participating communities

The following case studies provide some contextual information about the Tara and Stanthorpe Shires, and the C&IT initiatives they have implemented. The methods used to facilitate the inclusion and participation of people in these communities in the project activities are outlined, along with the outcomes of these methods and activities. Data for these case studies was obtained from various sources, including the 2001 census, official reports, community websites, reports on the evaluation of LEARNERS project workshops, and feedback and information provided by key contacts in the communities and at focus groups and interviews.

Tara Shire case study

Tara Shire is located in 'prime hard wheat country', 330 kilometres west of Brisbane. It has nine small townships in an area of 11,680 square kilometres and a population of just over 3,800 people. The main town of Tara has a population of 1,000 people. About one third of the population live in very impoverished circumstances on rural residential subdivisions with few services and facilities. The Shire has been identified as being in the top ten most disadvantaged communities in Queensland (Tara Shire, 2001) and has some significant communication problems. There are ongoing problems with telephone services, and there is no local newspaper and no local radio station. Some areas of the Shire only receive their mail twice a week, the majority of roads are unsealed, and public transport services are minimal. To compound these problems, the area has been affected by severe drought and bushfires in recent years.

The Shire's extensive geographic area, scattered population and changing demographic profile created a very divided community. People were not working together in most communities and many small townships were operating in isolation. Many people were 'apathetic and negative' and there was little proactive leadership. The community did not actively seek support and assistance from outside. Consequently, the area lagged behind in its development and in the uptake of new C&IT.

However, about three years ago, a new Mayor and new Shire Councilors were elected who provided positive leadership, instigated new community development initiatives and actively began building a more cooperative and pro-active community. Community leaders, particularly women, started to generate motivation through workshops, and successful events such as a multicultural festival. A number of C&IT initiatives were implemented, including:

- The Tara Shire Community Website (<http://www.tarashire.org.au>) which is sponsored by the Tara Shire Council. It provides information on community and business organisations and events, and access to Council services and information.
- Public Internet access at the Tara Library.
- A Learning Network Queensland Centre that provides access to a range of C&ITs and offers support for students undertaking external studies.
- Videoconferencing facilities that enable access to legal advice and information, particularly for women.
- Computer and Internet training courses and support services.
- The 'Cyberflora' project which involved developing a website (<http://www.gag.org.au>) and email network to facilitate the collaborative creation of a mural in the Myall Park Botanic Garden.
- The Westmar State School website (<http://www.westmarss.qld.edu.au>), created by children from this small rural township. The school has provided after hours access to computers and the Internet to adults in the community who were taught by the school children.
- Creation of an online magazine for young people.

Given this positive new energy and outlook, the Tara Shire Council expressed interest in using the LEARNERS process to help the community work together to reach its goals and to engage in more effective planning and evaluation. They hoped that the process could help improve communication across the Shire and training and access to new C&IT.

In May 2002, two QUT researchers met with senior staff and elected members of the Shire Council, including the Mayor. A meeting with community leaders and a workshop for community members was subsequently planned. Invitations to the workshop were sent to all community, sporting and business organisations. The Council's Community and Economic Development Officer became the local LEARNERS project coordinator. She was enthusiastic about the project and used her good relationships with community organisations and groups to generate interest and support. Assistance with project activities was provided by the IT Support Officer employed in the Tara Library by the Council. She managed the Community Website and conducted computer and Internet training. However, she left the community in early 2003 and has not been replaced by the Council.

An initial meeting was held in July 2002 with eight community leaders. Seven women and one man from various townships participated in this meeting. They included the President of the Shire Development Association, a school principal and one of the Cyberflora project leaders, who is a cattle breeder and artist.

Fifteen women and eight men with a diversity of ages and occupations participated in the community workshop, held the day after the community leaders meeting. The workshop included presentations about local C&IT projects and small group discussions about a hypothetical that aimed to facilitate understanding of the LEARNERS process.

Six of the workshop participants lived on a farm, while the others lived in or near to Tara or other townships. Participants worked in the areas of education and training, community

and youth development, retail, accounting, and agriculture. One was a priest, three were retired, and one was unemployed. Six women and three men held official positions in community organisations, and one man was a Shire councilor. The community workshop generated some new ideas and awareness about the use of new C&IT such as the Internet and community portals.

Following the community workshop, the local project coordinator made presentations about the project at a major community meeting in one of the small townships and at a meeting of school principals from around the Shire. A local project steering committee was formed comprising representatives from various townships. They participated in an 'email meeting' that nominated two projects that could be evaluated using the LEARNERS process: the Tara Shire Community Website and IT training and access across the Shire. Six sub-projects were also identified.

A workshop that collaboratively planned these evaluation projects was held in March 2003. This workshop involved four women and five men from various community organisations and the Shire Council. Key evaluation questions were identified and various evaluation methods were suggested by participants with input from the research team. These methods included focus group discussions, telephone interviews, and a survey of community members. The evaluation coordination group later decided to conduct a survey of the community. In part, this was due to participants' lack of skills and confidence in conducting interviews and facilitating focus groups and the time that would be required. Participants initially anticipated that this survey would be quickly completed. However, due to various factors, including the opportunity for professional assistance with redesigning part of the website, the survey has not yet been completed and distributed.

At the critical reflection workshop held in Toowoomba in December 2002, two local project coordinators reported some positive impacts of the project. It helped to improve the networking, communication and sharing of information between various community groups through email and the Shire website. More people in the Shire were using new C&IT, and new ways of using C&IT to overcome communication and distance problems were identified. However, they also reported that the business sector was the first to 'drop out' of the project and there was initially 'a lot of misconception as to what [the project] was about'. They had found it 'very hard' to explain the project and suggested that it needed to be put into 'a lot more user-friendly terms'. While groups such as school principals 'picked it up straight away', others found it difficult to understand. While interest in the project continues to be fairly high, the loss of the Council's IT Officer in early 2003 has had a major impact on key project activities.

Stanthorpe Shire case study

The Shire of Stanthorpe is located 230 kilometres south west of Brisbane in the Granite Belt region. It has two main towns and six villages within an area of 2,697 square kilometres and a population of 10,373 people. The main town of Stanthorpe has a population of 5,500. The major industries in the Shire are agriculture, farming and tourism, and the region is well known for its popular wineries and national parks. Like other parts of rural Queensland, the area has recently experienced a severe drought. A significant number of residents are of Italian descent, and some community members with a non-English speaking background do not have strong English literacy skills.

Compared with Tara Shire, Stanthorpe Shire has good communication systems and is serviced by a local radio station and newspaper. However, there is limited public access to the Internet, and a general lack of awareness of the potential opportunities that can be provided by new C&IT.

While the Granite Belt is a vibrant community, there are concerns about the number of residents who are leaving the area, particularly young people. The retention of young people is considered vital to the community's sustainability. Also, while the area has many active community groups and strong leaders, there is poor interaction and information sharing among groups, and newcomers find it difficult to gain formal leadership positions. The community is seen as conservative, and somewhat fragmented and insular and reluctant to seek help from outside. As in Tara Shire, women are leading many community development and C&IT projects.

The Stanthorpe Shire Council and Learning Network Queensland have recently implemented a range of economic and community development initiatives that use new C&IT. They include:

- The 'GraniteNet' website and virtual community project (<http://www.granitenet.net.au>), managed by a Project Officer in the Stanthorpe Shire Council. People can join about 80 diverse online community groups or start their own community or interest group. Community and business users can build their own web sites, accessed through the GraniteNet site.
- The Shire of Stanthorpe website (<http://www.stanthorpe.qld.gov.au>) which provides access to Council services and information.
- The Stanthorpe Community Learning Centre initiative which aims to become the hub of learning in the area and provide access to a range of education and training courses and communication technologies.
- A Learning Network Queensland Centre located in the Stanthorpe High School.
- Computer and Internet training courses.

The GraniteNet project was expected to enhance telecommunications and e-commerce access in the region. This initiative is funded through the Federal government's Networking the Nation program, and a key issue is the sustainability of GraniteNet when this funding runs out in 2003. A further issue is that community ownership in the project has not yet been established and it was largely regarded as a Council project.

In June 2002, QUT researchers and an industry partner representative met with the Shire's Economic Development Manager, the GraniteNet Project Officer, and the Stanthorpe Learning Community consultant. The Project Officer and the Learning Community consultant had previously agreed to be the local LEARNERS project coordinators. As in Tara Shire, a meeting with the local project 'advisory committee' and an initial workshop for community members was subsequently planned. Invitations to the workshop were sent to selected representatives of community organisations, projects and businesses.

Five women and two men participated in the advisory committee meeting. They included the Deputy Mayor and a committee member of Granite Belt Disability Support Services (both women). All of the advisory committee participated in the workshop, which involved ten women and three men with a range of ages and occupations. The group was younger than the Tara workshop group and was less diverse. Three lived on a farm while the others lived in or near to Stanthorpe or other townships. Participants worked in the areas of education and training, community and economic development, and local government. Two women and one man held official positions in community or educational organisations. Several participants expressed disappointment about the lack of broad community representation.

Many workshop participants were interested in lifelong learning and they identified the development of the Granite Belt as a learning community as key area of interest. Further meetings and workshops were held to begin planning activities associated with the Learning Community project. Some new participants joined these activities, most of which

were conducted without involvement from the QUT research team. Both the local coordinators and participants began to experience confusion about how the larger Learning Community project fitted with the QUT LEARNERS project.

In October 2002 local project leaders and QUT researchers planned and facilitated a workshop that developed vision statements for a learning community. This workshop involved fourteen women and four men from various community organisations and occupations. However, while some participants were happy with the workshop process and outcomes, others wanted to work on short-term projects and were unclear about where the project was heading.

At the critical reflection workshop in Toowoomba, the project coordinators expressed a desire for more participation by the researchers in the community activities. Maintaining the motivation and interest of participants and the local coordination group was a key issue. The local coordinators also reported experiencing problems with involving the business community and people in service clubs and schools.

The QUT researchers suggested that the Stanthorpe coordination group undertake an evaluation of the GraniteNet site to address the issue of the sustainability of the site once funding runs out, and to better meet the aims of the LEARNERS project. Some limitations were imposed on this proposed evaluation due to concerns about the potentially negative effects of seeking feedback from community members but being unable to make changes to the site due to various technical constraints.

However, following negotiations between the researchers and the local coordinators, the QUT team and industry partners facilitated a workshop at which a small group of six women and one man planned an evaluation of the Granite Belt Lifelong Learning Group's use of GraniteNet as a pilot project. Following the workshop, the group reviewed the Lifelong Learning Group's website and collaboratively designed a short survey of its members. The mostly positive feedback from this successful evaluation process helped to increase motivation among the local evaluation coordination group. A workshop involving researchers and industry partners was subsequently held in May 2003 to collaboratively analyse the survey data and critically reflect on the evaluation process. Actions to be taken, based on this analysis, were agreed to.

The project has had several positive impacts, including improved communication and linkages between community groups and organisations, and the formation of a core group of people who are enthusiastic about developing a learning community. The project has also had some effects on women's leadership and empowerment. One active participant, who had previously been a 'bystander' during meetings of her community support organisation, reported in an interview that she gained 'an incredible amount' of empowerment, that her leadership skills had increased 'tremendously', as well as her facilitation, communication and 'diplomacy' skills. However, the project also resulted in some confusion among community members about the link between the larger Learning Community project and the LEARNERS project, and maintaining the motivation and interest of participants was a challenge.

3. Evaluation results and project impacts and outcomes

This chapter summarises the results of the ongoing evaluation of LEARNERS project activities, discusses the key themes and issues that have emerged from our critical reflections and preliminary analysis of the project's activities and outcomes, and summarises the strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project. The various publications and papers of the project that have been prepared to date are listed and an assessment is made about how well the objectives of the three project components have been met.

Evaluation results

This section presents a profile of the project participants, summarises feedback received from participants in LEARNERS project workshops and other project activities held in Tara and Stanthorpe from July 2002 - May 2003. This feedback was collected via feedback forms completed at workshops, small group discussions conducted at the end of workshops, and feedback sent via email and provided during focus group discussions and individual interviews.

Profile of project participants

Table 1 summarises the gender, age group, community and industry sector, formal leadership positions and residential location of participants in key project activities conducted in Stanthorpe and Tara. Additional details about the participants were provided in the case studies.

The following provides a general profile of the participants:

- The majority were women. More men have taken part in activities in Tara compared with Stanthorpe.
- A large proportion was in the 40-59 age group. However, some were aged 20-39 and a few were over 60 years. Participants in Stanthorpe were generally younger than those in Tara.
- The majority lived in town, while some lived on a farm or property and some lived outside of town but not on a farm. A higher proportion of the Tara participants lived on a farm compared with the Stanthorpe participants.
- Most worked or were involved in the areas of community development, education and training or government. A few participants were business owners or operators and some were unemployed or uninvolved in formal community groups or organisations. Participants at the first community workshop in Tara were involved in a wider range of community or industry sectors compared with the same group in Stanthorpe.
- Some held formal leadership positions in community or business groups and organisations. A much higher proportion of female participants in Tara held formal leadership positions compared with those in Stanthorpe.
- Participants' level of understanding of participatory planning and evaluation, prior to the project, was much higher in Stanthorpe than in Tara.
- The majority had access to email and the Internet at work or at home.
- The majority had a white and/or Anglo-Celtic background. Two Stanthorpe participants were from a non-English speaking background.

Project activity	Gender		Age group			Residential location			Community or industry sector#					Leadership positions	
	Female	Male	20-39	40-59	Over 60	On farm	In town	Outside town	Community development	Education or training	Business	Government	Other*	Female	Male
Stanthorpe															
Advisory Committee meeting (August 2002)	5	2	3	3	1	2	3	2	2	2	0	4	0	2	1
Community workshop (August 2002)	10	3	5	6	1	3	6	3	5	5	1	3	0	2	1
Community workshop (October 2002)	14	4	6	9	3	4	11	3	4	5	2	3	5	2	1
Evaluation workshop (February 2002)	6	1	3	3	1	2	4	1	3	3	0	1	1	0	1
Focus group 1 (May 2003)	6	0	3	3	0	2	4	0	2	2	0	1	2	0	1
Focus group 2 (May 2003)	2	2	0	3	1	1	3	0	0	1	1	0	2	0	1
Tara															
Community leader meeting (July 2002)	7	1	0	7	0	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	4	1
Community workshop (July 2002)	15	8	4	13	2	6	9	4	11	4	6	5	2	6	4
Evaluation Workshop (March 2003)	4	5	2	5	2	2	5	2	7	1	0	1	4	3	3

Table 1: Profile of participants in key LEARNERS project activities

Note: Data on age and residential location was not obtained for some participants

Several participants are involved in more than one sector through their paid work and/or voluntary community activities

* This includes people who are retired, unemployed, or not involved in other community groups

Most valuable outcomes

The things that worked well and were considered by participants to be the most valuable outcomes of the workshops and other project activities included:

- *Networking*: 'Networking with community members that have similar goals and ideas for encouraging the community to develop and sustain in many areas' (female).
- *Leadership and cooperation among people and groups*: 'Leadership and co-operation of leaders and participants' (female).
- *Sense of empowerment*: 'Made me look at the uses for technology in new ways' (female); A woman participant with low confidence reported experiencing an 'incredible amount' of empowerment from her participation in various project activities.
- *Increased personal learning and skills development*: 'It satisfied my criteria of 'fun and profit' (female); 'I've really appreciated learning these skills' (female).
- *Community development focus*: 'I would like to see the project assist Tara to become a more consolidated community' (female); 'Working with a group of people who obviously had the betterment of Shire as their focus' (female).
- *The inclusive and participatory processes*: 'Allowing for each other to speak; consideration, listening, willingness to work together' (female); 'Group participation' (male); 'Making sure that everyone got to have their say by using direct questioning of individual participants and "round robin" methods' (female); 'It gives everyone the license to come in with their individual ideas and all of the ideas are given the same value and then worked out.. It's a very effective process' (female).
- *The group cooperation and collaboration*: 'Group work was effective' (male); 'A sense of open cooperation – I hope we can keep it up!' (female)
- *Information sharing* about community groups, projects and ideas in general: 'The ideas generated, the sharing of knowledge' (male); 'Increased knowledge of what is going on in community'
- *Effective facilitators*: 'Good at extracting information from people' (male); 'Kept us together when we got off the track' (female).
- *The workshop processes in general*: 'The workshop was great, I liked the questions'; 'The themeing/clustering was a good process - it made people focus and brought it to a point' (female).
- *Having a set agenda*: 'Keeping to agenda/timetable (worked well)' (female); 'Setting definite objective outcomes for the meeting' (female).
- *The brainstorming sessions*: 'Brainstorming session gave clarity' (female).
- *The visioning process*: 'Contacting members of the community and finding they had similar visions for the future' (male).
- *Development of definite outcomes*: 'Action list for next meeting' (female). 'The last two workshops with the QUT team (best met my needs) - very outcome driven which is important to me' (female).

Things that did not work so well

However, some things that did not work so well at the workshops were also identified:

- *Limited number and diversity of participants*: 'Would have hoped for a broader representation' (female); 'People from business community were involved initially'; 'There were more (community development) 'workers' than anticipated' (female).
- *Explanations of the LEARNERS project and process*: 'Clarification of what's expected (missing)' (male); 'First few meetings were confusing, the framework was not well enough explained' (female).

- *Confusing terminology*: 'Initially thought it was nebulous, jargon' (female); 'A bit abstract, particularly for anyone just joining the group' (female).
- *Lack of workshop outcomes and goals*: 'A lot of the outcomes were "fuzzy"' (male); 'Unclear directions' (female); 'I think there should have been clearer guidelines as to what we are actually doing and that more input from the conductors of the workshops to keep us on track would have saved time and perhaps made the workshop more productive' (female); 'Lack of conclusion to anything - I like things to be a little more definite and progress to be measurable' (female).
- *Time restrictions*: 'Time; felt not quite finished what the next step was' (male); 'Many ideas in a short space of time to consider' (female); 'There is never enough time to discuss everything' (female).
- *The communication process*: 'Too much hierarchy took the floor' (male).
- *Dominating participants*: 'Some people always wish to dominate' (female); 'It was sometimes a little frustrating when one member of the group was allowed to dominate the session with "his" issues' (female).
- *Lack of direction in initial workshops*: 'Not so clear on where this is heading' (female); 'More specific plans to get things happening in the community (needed' (male).
- *Agenda set by facilitators*: 'When facilitator has own method/agenda can tend to feel like railroading for participants – i.e. group work on vision statement' (female).
- *Unsuitable venues*: 'The acoustics of the venue (a hindrance)' (female).

Suggested improvements

The following improvements were suggested by participants:

- Increased participant diversity: 'A shire wide representation may have improved discussions' (male); 'More youth for their opinions' (female).
- Clearer explanations of the project and its processes: 'A simplified model needs to be produced' (male); 'More understanding of the research project and LEARNERS process itself' (female).
- Clearer goals: 'Maybe finished off with everyone making sure they had a clear understanding of where to go from here' (male); 'Better understanding on what QUT want to achieve ie. Understand process and setting of their limits'.
- Clearer roles of those involved: 'Need to differentiate between what community is doing and what QUT is doing' (female).
- Allow adequate time for discussions.
- Control dominating participants.
- Provide more information in advance: 'More information prior about LEARNERS process' (male); 'Folders provided prior to workshop' (male).
- The use of alternative venues was suggested at various workshops: 'Venue had too much background noise'.

Critical analysis of key themes in the LEARNERS process trial

Several themes and issues have emerged from our critical reflections and preliminary analysis of the implementation of the LEARNERS process in the Tara and Stanthorpe communities (see Lennie and Hearn, 2003a and 2003b). Key themes and issues identified include:

- The implications of framing the project as 'community development'.
- The problems that arose in working with a diversity of community members and groups.
- The contradiction between the ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in rural communities.

- Some people and groups seem to more readily connect with and understand the process compared with others.
- The extent to which the process is sustainable and widespread capacity building is possible.

Framing the project as 'community development'

The LEARNERS process was framed as potentially having a wide range of benefits for all sectors of rural communities, including local government, education, health and community services, business, and natural resource management. One of the aims of the process is to increase cooperation and collaboration between people in all sectors of a community. However, the people in the participating communities appear to have largely framed the process as 'community development' rather than one that might also have important outcomes for the economic sustainability and wellbeing of the community, for example.

In both communities, the project now mostly involves people working in the community service or education and training sectors. There has been limited involvement from either female or male businesspeople, farmers, and others involved in natural resource management, and those involved in providing communication technology services. Most participants in both communities are relatively well-educated women who are already active in the community. This outcome is not unexpected, given the formal and informal leadership roles that women are playing in rural community development and in the uptake of new C&IT in rural areas (Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

The project has attracted support and energy from a diversity of community members and organisations, particularly in Tara Shire. However, intense participation by influential community leaders such as CEOs and business people has been fairly limited. In Tara Shire, the project received good initial support from the Mayor and Deputy CEO (both men). The Mayor is no longer directly involved, but the Deputy CEO has continued to be involved. Participants from the small business sector could not see the relevance of the LEARNERS process to them and did not see immediate outcomes, so were the first group to drop out of the project.

Similar difficulties in attracting the business sector and people involved in service clubs were experienced by the Stanthorpe group. In Stanthorpe, the Economic Development Manager (a man with progressive ideas about the use of C&IT in development) actively participated in the project but left the community at the end of 2002. He was recently replaced by a woman who has had limited involvement with the project. The female Deputy Mayor of Stanthorpe was very actively involved until the end of 2002. She chose not to continue in an active role due to her many other commitments. The male project coordinator in Stanthorpe (a retired Deputy Principal of a high school) has taken a very active leadership role in the Granite Belt Learning Community project. However, given the dominance of women in local rural community development and educational activities, the majority of active participants in this community are women working in these areas in paid and voluntary roles.

The gendered nature of leadership in rural community development

These outcomes illustrate the gendered nature of leadership and community participation involved in rural community development processes. Wells and Tanner (1994) suggest that 'transformational' forms of leadership which emphasise collaboration, community and individual empowerment and support, and have been associated with rural women, could be vital to building sustainable rural communities. An example of this is the meaning of the term 'leadership' provided by a woman who participated in the first Stanthorpe focus group:

A person who works with a group towards a common goal, assisting each individual to achieve to their full potential, to grow and develop whilst achieving a common goal.

A further example is the Granite Belt Community Network which was mentioned at the second focus group in Stanthorpe and in interviews with participants. Several project participants in Stanthorpe belong to this group. The Network comprises mainly women involved in community development, and health, welfare and educational services. The group meets every quarter to network and share information and listen to guest speakers on topics of mutual interest. An open and inclusive approach is adopted in which any interested community member can participate in the network which has around 70 members and has successfully operated for nearly 10 years.

It is therefore possible that the participatory processes used in the LEARNERS project were more congruent with the empowering and inclusive leadership and participation styles of women in these rural communities, compared with those of most rural businessmen and men in positions of formal power. Further research on this issue will be undertaken in the remainder of the project.

Problems working with diverse community groups

Mathie and Greene (1997, p.279) point out that creating and maintaining diversity within the group involved is 'often considered to be essential to the very concept of participatory evaluation'. While the local coordinators in both Tara and Stanthorpe had some success in involving a diversity of people and organisations in the various project activities, working in an inclusive way was problematic.

In Tara Shire, a broad diversity of people took part in the initial workshop. However, following the workshop, participants had very different understandings about the aims and outcomes of the project. In addition, while the concepts underpinning the LEARNERS process were readily understood by highly educated groups such as school principals, other community members were less familiar with the terminology and concepts used. They are likely to have experienced some disempowerment as a result.

Although the QUT researchers consulted the local coordinators about the suitability of the information provided, they later considered it 'quite complex'. One of the local coordinators suggested that information needed to be 'tailored' to the many different 'target groups' involved. Explaining the process to the diverse community groups had been very difficult. To overcome this problem, she focused on the positive outcomes of the project for the community, rather than the type of process being used and the concepts underpinning the process. This outcome indicates that the somewhat academic and bureaucratic language used at times by the urban researchers was inappropriate for many of these rural participants, who were unfamiliar with terms such as 'participatory action research' and 'community capacity building', and perhaps wary of the agenda behind their use.

Compared with Tara Shire, the Stanthorpe Shire coordinators were initially less successful in attracting a very diverse group. They used various strategies to encourage new people from a broader diversity of organisations to participate, including press releases published in a local newspaper and personal invitations. However, they found this process 'hard to handle'. Also, when new people joined, they lacked an adequate understanding of the project's aims and methodology.

While some Stanthorpe participants were happy with the way the project was proceeding and the participatory methods used, many wanted to be 'told what to do next'; they wanted an agenda and objectives they 'could achieve by the end of the week'. It was

therefore decided that smaller short-term projects needed to be implemented. A small group was later formed to coordinate the evaluation of the Lifelong Learning group's use of GraniteNet. They successfully planned and conducted this evaluation with guidance from the researchers and two industry partners. This group of six women and one man was relatively diverse in terms of the organisations represented, but less diverse than the larger Learning Community Project group. This outcome appears to support Mathie and Greene's (1997, p.282) argument, in relation to participatory evaluation, that 'less diversity may sometimes be a practical and strategic step for a transformative agenda'.

A number of other factors, particular to rural areas, affected the number and diversity of people who have been involved in the project. They include:

- Lack of effective access to new C&IT and to effective training and support in using C&IT.
- The ongoing drought that has severely affected both communities.
- The bushfires that occurred in both areas at the end of 2002. A workshop to be conducted in Tara in November 2002 was cancelled due to the bushfires and other factors.
- The long distances some people needed to travel to workshops and meetings, particularly in the Tara area.
- The fact that active community members in rural areas are often involved in multiple community organisations and projects, and their time and energy to take part in community consultations and research projects is often very limited.

The ideal versus the reality of implementing the process

The LEARNERS process is underpinned by a relatively idealistic vision of a diversity of women and men from all community sectors collaborating and cooperating, building their capacities, engaging in ongoing learning, and using empowering and inclusive forms of leadership and participation. Community members are envisaged to be effectively using C&IT in these activities. However, translating such an ideal into practice is problematic.

In making our preliminary assessments of the LEARNERS process trial it is useful to consider the macro structures and micro level contexts involved and the interrelationships between them (Lennie, 2002). The macro level context includes government policies that promote capacity building and 'community engagement', inequities in access to new C&IT, the social and economic effects of the drought, and the often male-dominated leadership structures in rural communities. The micro level contexts include the power relations among people in community organisations, the diverse values and communication needs of community members and groups, and the time and energy that various groups and individuals have available that can affect their level of interest and participation.

Small rural communities such as those involved in our project are often fragmented and insular with groups competing against each other rather than collaborating. Formal leadership structures such as local government tend to be patriarchal and 'concomitant with elitism based on rural conservatism' (Gray and Lawrence, 2001, p.197). New residents can experience exclusion, and women are often absent from key decision-making roles. However, the project has attracted women and some men in leadership positions in community development, education and welfare who are interested in using more inclusive communication and participation processes and fostering learning communities.

While some improvements have recently occurred, many people and organisations in Queensland rural communities lack effective access to new C&IT or do not have the resources, interest or capacity to use these technologies regularly. During times of great

social and economic hardship such as drought, other issues are often more pressing than access to the Internet. Lack of time, resources and energy is a key barrier to participation in this context.

Our current and previous research has found that women are often the 'new pioneers' in the uptake of the Internet in rural areas (Rural Women and ICTs Team, 1999). While this suggests that women should be a key target group, the approach advocated by the project is one that aims to be inclusive of all community members and groups. However, as we have noted above, gaining the interest and active participation of both women and men from all community sectors, particularly the farming, business and technology sectors, proved problematic. This indicates a need to develop and implement new strategies for participation that are more relevant to a broad diversity of community members.

Connecting with the process

Related to the above issues is that participatory evaluation methods fit better with some people's values, beliefs and ideologies than with others. Some people involved in the project clearly preferred more traditional planning and evaluation methods that are not underpinned by the democratic ideals of PAR. Some project participants were unfamiliar with the concepts used, others viewed terms such as 'community capacity building' as 'jargon', and several initially considered the process as quite complex. The local coordinators found it difficult to explain the LEARNERS process to certain community groups.

This raises questions about the ways in which the LEARNERS processes can be most successfully used by rural communities, including: 'do all of the people involved need a good understanding of the process and its underlying concepts and principles?' This has implications for the empowerment, inclusion and participation of a broad diversity of people.

One way to understand this issue is via the distinction between tacit and codified knowledge (Hearn and Foth, forthcoming). Most research methods aim to produce codified knowledge, privileging theory, formal definitions, arguments or other publicly verifiable knowledge forms. Although this is seldom acknowledged, these methods also produce tacit knowledge among researchers and participants. This knowledge is embedded in their actions and everyday experiences. PAR also produces codified knowledge. For example, Marxist (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988), feminist (Naples and Clark, 1996) and liberal (Argyris, 1982) forms of action research have emerged. However PAR also explicitly privileges the production of tacit knowledge, given that it is an important source of the construction of knowledge about local communities, as well as the implementation of changes in those communities. Tacit knowledge is therefore an important part of the local social ecology of the LEARNERS project.

Expressed in these terms, the questions for the LEARNERS project become: 'how important is it for participants to engage with the codified knowledge of the researchers?' and 'how can researchers engage with and design processes in terms of the tacit knowledge of various groups in a community?' Too much of a focus on producing codified knowledge means that the project risks being irrelevant to the community, which is more concerned with practical solutions to C&IT issues. Too great an emphasis on the tacit knowledge of conservative community members and groups risks replicating existing non-inclusive processes. Our challenge is therefore to use the whole diversity of tacit knowledge of the community in research that embodies the principles of PAR.

Long-term sustainability of the process

In both Tara and Stanthorpe there appears to be a certain degree of dependency of the participants on the researchers and project partners to generate ongoing motivation and to facilitate workshops and other activities. A further issue is that key project leaders in each community have left the area to live elsewhere. This suggests a need for some adaptability or succession of project leaders. The outcomes of the project suggest that to be effective, the LEARNERS process requires a dedicated and funded driver or project leader. The ideal project leader needs to:

- believe that the LEARNERS process can help address their strategic needs;
- be committed to their community and to using the process;
- have sufficient time, resources and support to implement the process effectively;
- have good networks and networking/communication skills; and
- have the ability to explain or 'translate' the process to a variety of community groups and individuals.

While the workshops in each community initially attracted fairly large groups, only a small group has been actively involved in planning and conducting the evaluations in each community. An alternative model for the LEARNERS process therefore appears to be a limited core group of people who are driving the process with a secondary group of interested stakeholders. The ideal would be that the core group is representative of multiple community sectors and groups. However, while this model appears to make the process more feasible, it raises questions about the extent to which new skills, knowledge and ideas will be passed on to others.

This suggests that the long-term sustainability of the LEARNERS process is a key issue. One woman focus group participant made the following observation about 'sustainability' in relation to C&IT projects:

Obviously it's the key to long-term success of any project like this and relates to the capacity of the program to be sustained as well as the capacity of the community to sustain a project without outside support.

The sustainability of the process includes identifying the factors that will enable participants to continue using the process once the project is concluded. This will be the focus of future stages of the project during which the research team aims to develop a practical and useful LEARNERS Resource Kit for rural communities. Funding to collaboratively develop this kit with community participants has recently been sought through a QUT Community Service grant.

Strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project

Based on our critical reflections on the trial of the LEARNERS process and on the methodology and methods used in the project, and feedback from community participants, the following strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project have been identified. At this stage, more feedback on the LEARNERS process has been obtained from participants in Stanthorpe.

Strengths of the LEARNERS process

- Increases linkages, networking, collaboration and information sharing between groups in communities. Information sharing helps people 'appreciate the value of other perspectives'.
- Increases understanding of inclusive community participation practices.

- Encourages participants to consider the needs and issues of various groups in the community, for example older people, younger people and women.
- The process is flexible and transparent and can be adapted to meet different needs and objectives.
- Provides greater insight into the limits and opportunities of C&IT for communities and the level of community openness to new C&IT initiatives.
- Builds on the strengths present in the community, including the skills, knowledge, social capital, and human and technological infrastructure.
- Can produce community and individual empowerment. The process develops skills, knowledge and understanding of participatory planning and evaluation and can build confidence.
- The process of continual reflection leads to continual improvement.
- Can enhance lifelong learning.
- The process helps groups to better develop and maintain a focus, define clearer objectives, work out 'where to go from there' and provides a useful framework of reference for evaluation, planning and assessment. All input is seen as valuable.
- The process can help maintain the motivation of community groups through positive feedback and support.
- The methods used can be applied in other contexts and community projects (not just those involving C&IT).

Limitations of the LEARNERS process

- The many complex barriers to community participation and inclusion in rural communities, particularly in times of economic hardship and change.
- Obtaining ongoing participation and involvement from the whole diversity of community sectors and groups. The process appears to attract mainly women, people involved in community development and education, and reflective learners.
- Participatory evaluation methods fit better with some people's values, beliefs and ideologies than with others.
- The time and commitment required to participate and develop ideas.
- Obtaining understanding of the process from community members with different levels of skills, knowledge and understanding of participatory planning and evaluation and PAR. Information on the process needs to be 'tailored' to the different groups involved.
- The process was initially considered complex and confusing by several community participants.
- The process is not interventionist enough - this is a paradox of the process and can potentially lead to the process being hijacked by the interests of particular community groups.
- The level of dependence of the community on outside facilitators or evaluation professionals. Finding ways of making the process sustainable beyond the project is a key issue.

Strengths of the LEARNERS project

- Has generated good learning opportunities for the industry partners, community participants and the research team.
- Collaboration with the industry partners and community participants has been very strong compared to other research projects. Some industry partner representatives have been very actively involved in community workshops and focus groups and other project activities, and their professional development has been enhanced.
- Has provided greater insights into the limits and opportunities of the use of C&IT by rural communities.

- Is adding value to community processes rather than being extractive research for academic purposes.
- The rigorous ongoing evaluation process has provided a strong test of theories about community empowerment, inclusion and participation and the role of C&IT in these processes.
- The project has produced some positive outcomes and effects in the participating communities and for individual community participants and industry partners.

Limitations of the LEARNERS project

- The funding, time and resources required to successfully undertake all project activities and meet objectives has been limited.
- Only the involved industry partner representatives have benefited from their participation.
- The tension between the ideology of PAR and the fact that the researchers are coming into the community with preexisting agendas and objectives.
- Some of the terminology used was seen as 'jargon'.
- The project was not seen as relevant to people in some community sectors.
- Tracking the direct and indirect impacts and effects of the project in the communities involved is a difficult and resource-intensive process.
- Post project planning has not yet been undertaken.

Project presentations and papers

Other project outcomes are the various presentations and publications on the project and related research. Several publications and papers have been published on conference websites and on the LEARNERS project website. Project presentations and conference papers are detailed in Table 2 below

Date	Event and location	Topic	Presenter(s)
17 October 2002	Interdepartmental Human Services Committee meeting, Toowoomba	Overview of the LEARNERS project and process	June Lennie
30 October 2002	Australasian Evaluation Society Conference, Wollongong, New South Wales	Can the participatory evaluation of new communication technology initiatives assist in building sustainable and inclusive communities?	June Lennie and Greg Hearn
10 June 2003	Department of Family and Community Services staff meeting, Brisbane	Overview of the LEARNERS project and process	Nancy Entwistle
17 June 2003	LEARNERS networking breakfast	Overview of the LEARNERS project and process	Greg Hearn and June Lennie
9 July 2003	Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference, Brisbane	Designing inclusive communication and participation processes: Interim findings from the trial of a participatory evaluation process involving diverse rural communities and organisations	June Lennie
11 July 2003	Fibrepower in the Regions, Public Panel Discussion, Fibreculture Conference, Brisbane	The LEARNERS process and key issues arising from the project	June Lennie

Table 2: Presentations on the LEARNERS project

The following papers on the project and on related research have been prepared to date:

Lennie, J. and Hearn, G. The potential of PAR and participatory evaluation for increasing the sustainability and success of community development initiatives using new communication technologies. Action Learning, Action Research & Process Management and Participatory Action Research Congress, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 21-24 September, 2003 (submitted June 2003).

Lennie, J. and Hearn, G. (2003). Designing inclusive communication and participation processes: Interim findings from the trial of a participatory evaluation process involving diverse rural communities and organizations, in Hatcher, C, Flew, T., and Jacobs, J. (eds) *Proceedings, Australian and New Zealand Communication Association Conference ANZCA03: Designing Communication for Diversity*, Brisbane, 9-11 July 2003. Available: <http://www.bgsb.qut.edu.au/conferences/ANZCA03/Proceedings/default.htm>

Lennie, J., Hatcher, C. and Morgan, W. (2003). Feminist discourses of (dis)empowerment in an action research project involving rural women and communication technologies, *Action Research*, 1 (1) 57-80.

Lennie, J. Critically evaluating rural women's participation and empowerment: An interdisciplinary feminist framework for research and analysis, in Behera, M.C. (ed.) *Perspectives on Rural Development* (submitted January 2003).

Lennie, J. and Hayward, C. (2003). Community participation and empowerment: Taking gender, power and contradictory outcomes into account. *Development and Change* (submitted February 2003).

Lennie, J. A new model for rural women's empowerment: Taking 'technological empowerment' into account, *Sociologia Ruralis* (submitted November 2002).

Lennie, J. and Simpson, L. A holistic planning and evaluation framework for sustainable rural community development that uses communication technologies, *Evaluation* (submitted November 2002).

Lennie, J. Simpson, L., and Hearn, G. (2002). Can the participatory evaluation of new communication technology initiatives assist in building sustainable and inclusive rural communities? Australasian Evaluation Society International Evaluation Conference, Wollongong, New South Wales, 30 October - 1 November 2002. Available: <http://www.aes.asn.au/conference/cfindex.htm>

Lennie, J. (2002a). Including a diversity of rural women in a communication technology access project: Taking the macro and micro contexts into account, in Johanson, G. and Stillman, L (eds) *Proceedings, Electronic Networks - Building Community: 5th Community Networking Conference*, Monash University, Melbourne, 3-5 July 2002 (published on CD ROM).

Lennie, J. (2002b). Rural women's empowerment in a communication technology project: some contradictory effects, *Rural Society* 12 (3), 224-245.

Lennie, J. (2002c). Care and connection in online groups linking rural and urban women in Australia: some contradictory effects, *Feminist Media Studies* 2 (3), 289-306.

How well the project objectives have been met

This report has presented details of the project's activities and outcomes and the results of the ongoing evaluation of the LEARNERS process and project which indicate that the

objectives of the three interrelated project components have generally been met quite well, at this stage of the project.

The LEARNERS process has been further developed and evaluated through various critical reflection and data analysis workshops and through focus groups and interviews. Learnings have been obtained about what works and what does not work so well and about the most effective, practical and realistic models for project leadership, community participation and community capacity building. Gender and other differences and contextual issues have been taken into account in this process.

A range of community participation and training methods and activities were designed and implemented in collaboration with project coordinators, community participants and industry partners. The researchers frequently used methods such as small group discussions that were effective in giving voice to participants (particularly less confident women) and in increasing skills, knowledge and understanding of participatory planning and evaluation. Based on the feedback received, these methods and activities were revised or redesigned to better meet community needs. Ongoing information, advice and support were provided to local coordinators and participants, the majority of whom were women.

Evaluation indicators were developed to guide the ongoing critical evaluation and impact assessment process. A range of processes and tools were developed with some input from community participants to evaluate the project's various methods and activities. However, time was not always available to obtain feedback on proposed evaluation methods and tools and feedback requested by email was not always forthcoming. This evaluation took gender, age, ethnicity, occupation, level of knowledge of participatory planning and evaluation and other differences into account, and provided a profile of the participants. Valuable learnings were obtained from the ongoing evaluation.

Case studies on each community, key themes and issues, and preliminary conclusions have been developed. The themes and issues demonstrate the complex factors that need to be considered when implementing community participation and capacity building processes. The strengths and limitations of the LEARNERS process and project were identified. A key issue is the sustainability of the process once the project ends. To address this, the researchers plan to develop a LEARNERS Resource Kit for rural communities, if funding for this is forthcoming.

Our preliminary results suggest that the project has had some success in building community capacities, generating community participation and empowerment and increasing communication, collaboration and cooperation among groups in both areas. Many participants were members of community organisations and groups and some have used their new skills, understanding, confidence and knowledge to benefit these community groups. However, difficulties were experienced in obtaining a clear and widespread understanding of the LEARNERS process and the project.

The LEARNERS process was adapted for use by each of the participating communities, who chose to use different methods for obtaining community participation and interest, with somewhat different outcomes. While the participation of women from somewhat diverse backgrounds was achieved, community participation was less inclusive than had been aimed for. There has been limited involvement from women and men in the following groups:

- people involved in Landcare and natural resource management;
- farmers and graziers;
- business owners and operators;
- computer, Internet or telecommunications service providers;

- health professionals and workers;
- uninvolved in community groups and organizations;
- in the 18 - 25 age range;
- non-English speaking background;
- lower education levels; and
- with limited access to new C&IT.

Feedback from Stanthorpe participants indicates that the project was effective in enhancing the formal and informal leadership of some women who have been actively involved in the project. New knowledge and awareness about women's leadership and participation in C&IT projects has been developed through various project activities and publications. Further research is required to assess gender and other differences related to community leadership in C&IT projects, the use of the LEARNERS process, the level and types of empowerment experienced, and project impacts and effects. Further analysis of the gendered power relations enacted in the project will also be undertaken.

Some new knowledge and awareness has been obtained about the use of C&IT in community development and the readiness of the communities involved to take up new C&IT such as the Internet. This has been obtained through the research undertaken in Tara and Stanthorpe as well as through literature reviews. Valuable learnings from a small scale evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Group's use of GraniteNet, have been shared with others. A much larger-scale community-wide survey about the Tara Shire Community Website and IT training in the Shire has not yet been conducted.

While several short-term impacts and effects of the project in each community have been identified, tracking all the ripple effects of the project on individual participants, industry partner organisations and the communities has been beyond the time and resources of the project. Much less feedback on the use and impacts of the LEARNERS process and other contextual information has been received from the Tara community compared with the Stanthorpe community. An adequate analysis of each community in terms of gender and other differences related to community participation, inclusion and leadership, and impacts of the project is therefore difficult at this stage.

Future research

The remainder of the project will seek to develop new knowledge and information on:

- Methods of enhancing community involvement and ownership of initiatives and community leadership, particularly for people from various equity groups.
- Gender differences in leadership and strategies for enhancing women's participation in C&IT initiatives.
- Methods that would enable governments to more effectively work in partnership with people in rural communities.
- Increasing the long-term sustainability and success of community development initiatives that use C&IT.

The following will be the focus of further analysis:

- Gender and other differences related to community leadership in C&IT projects, the use of the LEARNERS process, the level and types of empowerment experienced, and project impacts and effects.
- The gendered power relations enacted in the project and gender differences in discourses of empowerment/disempowerment, and inclusion/exclusion.
- The strengths and limitations of the use of C&IT in rural community development.

- The direct and indirect impacts of the LEARNERS project and community-based C&IT initiatives on individual participants, the industry partner organisations and the participating communities.

Future research will also involve:

- Obtaining information about community participation and leadership, and feedback on the LEARNERS process and project from participants in the Tara Shire.
- The development of a comprehensive LEARNERS Resource Kit for rural communities. If additional funding is forthcoming, this will be undertaken during 2004 in close collaboration with the participating communities.

4. Conclusions

As other research has found, implementing community participation and evaluation processes that aim to be inclusive and empowering raises many complex issues (Boyce, 2001; Lennie, 2002; Mathie and Greene, 1997). The preliminary results from our trial of the LEARNERS process in two diverse rural communities suggest that a number of social, cultural, environmental, organisational, and methodological factors were involved in obtaining participation from a wide diversity of people from different community sectors.

The results of our ongoing evaluation of the LEARNERS process and project indicate that the objectives of the three interrelated project components have generally been met quite well. However, we recognise that we were working with community members and organisations that were already interested in the using the LEARNERS process and committed to the project for its duration. Future research would need to consider how effectively the LEARNERS process would work with less committed and interested community members and organisations.

The key themes and issues that emerged from our analysis include:

- The implications of framing the project as 'community development'.
- The contradiction between the ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in rural communities.
- The problems that arose in working with a diversity of community members and groups.
- Some people and groups seem to more readily connect with and understand the process compared with others.
- The extent to which the process is sustainable and widespread capacity building is possible.

People in both the Tara and Stanthorpe communities seem to have largely framed the LEARNERS process as 'community development' rather than one that might also have important outcomes for the economic and environmental sustainability and wellbeing of the community, for example. In both areas, the project mainly involves people in the community service or education and training sectors. There has been limited involvement from the business sector, farmers, and people involved in natural resource management. Most participants are relatively well-educated women who are already very active in their communities. This is not an unexpected outcome, given the leadership roles that many women are playing in rural community development and in the uptake of new C&IT in rural areas (Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999). This outcome illustrates the gendered nature of leadership and community participation involved in rural community development processes.

The ideals of the LEARNERS process and the reality of implementing the process in the two communities suggested several contradictions. We argued that in critically assessing the implementation of the process it is useful to consider the macro and micro level contexts of the project and the interrelationships between them. A significant challenge is to use the whole diversity of tacit knowledge of community members in research that embodies the principles of PAR and offers practical solutions to C&IT problems.

A wide range of issues and barriers related to community participation and inclusion were identified that need to be considered in projects of this kind. However, the choice not to participate, or to only participate in a limited way, should be seen as one that is legitimate and rational. This suggests the importance of acknowledging and understanding the perspectives of non-participants as well as participants in action research projects.

Mathie and Greene (1997, p.284) suggest that, when the participatory evaluation process moves into the action phase, 'the loss of diversity at the margins of participation need not necessarily be seen as a failure'. This indicates that our strategy of continuing to encourage the involvement of a broad diversity of community members and organisations in project activities while ideal, perhaps may not have been as essential during the later implementation stages.

The initial findings we have reported here suggest a need to consider the extent to which the LEARNERS process will work successfully in all rural communities and with all kinds of groups. In this type of action research, it seems important to involve those who are willing to engage in participatory evaluation processes, willing to reflect critically on evaluation results, and willing to use these learnings to redesign C&IT initiatives to better meet community needs and goals.

An important learning is the need to consider the community members and groups that may be willing to be involved in the participatory planning and evaluation of C&IT projects, and interested in ongoing learning about the use of C&IT in community development. The relevance of the project to a diversity of community members, the capacity of various groups to participate, and the time, energy and resources required to obtain inclusive participation and to implement participation strategies also need to be considered. For example, some women in rural areas who are not in paid employment, and have many other family or community commitments, are often excluded. Other community members who have personal or business commitments may not have the time or energy to participate. The strategies used to obtain participation, and the participation process used, may also suggest that a high level of knowledge and literacy is needed to participate effectively, thus excluding some community members and groups. This indicates a need to develop and implement new strategies for participation that are more relevant to a broad diversity of community members.

Our preliminary analysis indicates that an alternative model for the LEARNERS process is a smaller core group of people who are driving the process with a secondary group of interested stakeholders. The ideal would be that the core group is representative of multiple community sectors and groups. However, while this model appears to make the process more feasible, it raises questions about the extent to which new skills, knowledge and ideas will be passed on to others.

Some factors, such as droughts, bushfires, and living in a remote location from project activities, have a particular impact on community participation in rural areas. The time, energy and cost of participation are other important factors, as well as the time required to create interest and understanding. The time, energy and resources required to participate were not always readily available, given that many participants or interested community members were often already actively involved in several community groups and projects. This situation is common in many rural communities. However, even with sufficient resources, it is possible that the same people may have participated in the project, due to the particular systems and networks that operate in the communities involved.

Problems related to time and resources also affected the research team's ability to successfully meet project objectives. While communication technologies such as email and teleconferencing can be useful in overcoming some of these barriers, our current and previous research demonstrates that effective community participation processes requires some face-to-face communication and interaction (Lennie, 2001; Rural Women and ICTs Research Team, 1999).

Other factors affecting the level of community participation and interest include:

- the perceived complexity of both the information provided to participants and the LEARNERS process itself;
- the extent to which the project's local coordinators could readily understand the process and communicate this to others;
- the existing level of skills and knowledge of people in various community sectors;
- the perceived relevance of the project to different community members and groups; and
- the various communication strategies used to involve different community groups.

The Tara coordinator had particular difficulties in getting people in some community groups to understand the process and resorted to focusing on the benefits of the project to the community instead.

The academic and bureaucratic terminology used in some project literature and during some project activities, was clearly inappropriate for effectively generating understanding among the diverse rural participants. Complexity is also heightened by differing contexts of meaning, different values, perceptions and agendas, and a lack of time to effectively develop relationships based on mutual understanding between participants and stakeholders.

Feedback on the project indicates that, despite the barriers and issues identified above, it has had several positive impacts on the participating communities, including:

- Increased linkages, networking, collaboration and information sharing between groups in the communities.
- Greater insight about the limitations and opportunities of C&IT for communities and the level of community openness to new C&IT initiatives.
- Identification of new ways of using C&IT to overcome communication and distance problems in Tara Shire.
- Some community and individual empowerment has occurred through participants' increased skills, knowledge and understanding of participatory planning and evaluation and greater feelings of confidence.
- Some increase in women's participation and leadership in C&IT projects.
- The formation of a core group of enthusiastic people in Stanthorpe who are actively working towards the development of a learning community in the region. The motivation and interest of this group increased following their evaluation of the Lifelong Learning Group's use of GraniteNet.

The long-term sustainability of the use of the LEARNERS process is a major issue that will be addressed in the remainder of the project. A dedicated and funded local driver of the process with good communication skills and networks seems essential. Our preliminary results also suggest that a more realistic and practical focus and regular critical reflection and rigorous evaluation are essential for successful participatory projects in rural communities.

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Appendix 1: Calendar of project activities

Note: This calendar does not include activities undertaken by the participating communities without the QUT research team.

2001

December 6 1st meeting of the project steering group

2002

February 19 2nd meeting of the project steering group

March 15 Half-day workshop with industry partners to critically assess the planning and evaluation framework

April 9 3rd meeting of the project steering group

May 28 Meeting with community representatives in Tara

June 3 Meeting with community representatives in Stanthorpe

June 4 4th meeting of the project steering group
Teleconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe

June 24 Teleconference with Tara Shire Council coordinators

July 17 Community leaders meeting in Tara

July 18 Community workshop in Tara

July 23 Teleconference with project coordinators in Stanthorpe

August 6 Teleconference with Tara Shire Council coordinators

August 14 Meeting with advisory committee in Stanthorpe

August 15 Community workshop in Stanthorpe

August 27 5th meeting of the project steering group
Teleconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe

September 25 Teleconference with advisory committee members in Stanthorpe

October 7 Meeting with advisory committee in Stanthorpe
Community workshop in Stanthorpe

October 25 Teleconference with Tara coordinators and participants

November 12 6th meeting of the project steering group
Teleconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe

December 16 Critical reflection workshop in Toowoomba

2003

January 1	Teleconference with project coordinators in Stanthorpe
February 11	7 th meeting of the project steering group and critical reflection workshop. Teleconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe
February 25	Evaluation planning workshop in Stanthorpe
March 18	Meeting with industry partners to develop a project communication plan
March 25	Evaluation planning workshop in Tara
April 1	Meeting with industry partners to further develop a project communication plan and attract additional sponsorship
April 29	8 th meeting of the project steering group Teleconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe
May 27-28	Evaluation data analysis workshop, focus groups and interviews in Stanthorpe
June 17	Networking breakfast. Video and audio link with community participants and others in Tara and Stanthorpe
July 8	9 th meeting of the project steering group Videoconference with community representatives in Tara and Stanthorpe

Appendix 2: Statistical data on the Tara and Stanthorpe communities

Tara Shire

General characteristics:

- 330 km west of Brisbane.
- Area - 11,679.9 sq km
- Population of 3,813, dispersed over nine townships and settlements (principal town is Tara - population 1000, Meandarra, Glenmorgan, The Gums, Moonie, Westmar, Inglestone, Hannaford, Residential Subdivisions)
- Males (53.19%) outnumber females (46.81%)
- 10.73% are aged over 65
- 11.8% unemployment rate
- 2.86% are Indigenous
- 86.65% are born in Australia
- 12 persons born in Germany; 13 in the Netherlands; 11 in the Philippines.

Industry and employment:

- Primary industries – wool, beef, grain
- The Shire contributes 6% to total agricultural production value for the Darling Downs.
- Oil extraction
- Residential sub-division
- 1,565 persons are in the labour force (males 60.7%, females 49.2%)
- Mean taxable income \$25,446 per annum (1998-99)

Education:

- 21.9% of the total population is enrolled in educational institutions.
- 89% are in pre, primary and secondary education.
- 3% attend TAFE
- 4% attend university or other tertiary institutions
- 3.5% attend other institutions

Computer and Internet use:

- 27.9% of the population uses a computer at home
- Women aged 35 - 44 are the largest group of home computer users (11.5% of all home computer users)
- Children under 10 are the second largest group of home computer users
- 20% of the population uses the Internet
- 49.1% of Internet users access the Internet only from home
- 54.1% of Internet users are women

Stanthorpe Shire

General characteristics:

- 230 km south west of Brisbane
- Area - 2,696.9 sq km
- Population of 9,860 dispersed over two main towns (principal town is Stanthorpe - population 5,500, Wallangarra) and six villages (Ballandean, The Summit, Glen Aplin, Thulimba, Cottonvale and Amiens)
- Males (50.33%) slightly outnumber females (49.67%)
- 15.27% are aged over 65

- 8.0% unemployment rate
- 1.29% are Indigenous
- 81.4% are born in Australia
- 134 individuals do not speak English very well
- 488 persons born in Southern and Eastern Europe; of those 354 were born in Italy.

Industry and employment:

- Primary industries – crops, viticulture, livestock
- The Shire contributes 5.8% to total agricultural production value for the Darling Downs
- Production of commodities and goods
- Business and personal services
- Wholesale, retail, accommodation, cafes, restaurants
- Government services
- 4,292 persons are in the labour force (males 56.7%, females 51.2%)
- Mean taxable income \$25,673 per annum (1998-99)

Education:

- 22.1% of the total population is enrolled in educational institutions.
- 82% are in pre, primary and secondary education.
- 10.5% attend TAFE
- 5% attend university or other tertiary institutions
- 2% attend other institutions.

Computer and Internet use:

- 31.6% of the population uses a computer at home
- Women aged 35 - 44 are the largest group of home computer users (9.7% of all home computer users)
- Women aged 45 - 54 are the second largest group of home computer users
- 23.3% of the population uses the Internet
- 49.3% of Internet users access the Internet only from home
- 50.0% of Internet users are women

Appendix 3: Proposed timeframe of project activities August 2003 - October 2004

LEARNERS PROJECT: Timeline August 2003 -- October 2004

2003-2004	Steering Group Meetings	Focus groups, workshops	Transcription, data analysis	Reports, papers, conferences
Aug		Tara	Check transcripts	
Sep		Stanthorpe	Transcribe interviews, focus groups	ALARPM conference
Oct	X		Coding and data analysis	Journal articles
Nov		Critical reflection, Toowoomba	Coding and data analysis	Journal articles
Dec	X			Journal articles
Jan				Journal articles
Feb	X	Tara, Stanthorpe		
Mar			Transcribe interviews, focus groups	Draft report to Office for Women
Apr	Critical reflection	Critical reflection, Tara, Stanthorpe	Coding and data analysis	Final report to Office for Women
May	X		Coding and data analysis	
Jun		Tara, Stanthorpe recommendations		Case studies
Jul	X	Stanthorpe		Draft final report
Aug	Seminar, recommendations	Seminar, recommendations		Seminar
Sep		Tara, Stanthorpe		Recommendations
Oct	X			Journal articles, final report