

The Evolution of the Delta Community

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Until the advent of Delta, there was no organization and no regular conferences specific to mathematics education at university in our region. Delta was born in 1997 when a small group of university mathematics educators from several Queensland institutions met at QUT to discuss the possibility of holding a conference, (later called a symposium) at which they and their colleagues could discuss the teaching and learning of mathematics at university level. The meeting was organized by Patricia Cretchley, recently arrived from South Africa, who had a dream - to bring together her colleagues from her old and new countries. Delta has achieved many things in the last ten years but there is no doubt that the dream has come true.

The participants in the first symposium in 1997 came mainly from Australia, South Africa, New Zealand and the United States. This led us to start thinking about ourselves as a southern hemisphere group of educators and the words "southern hemisphere" appeared in the titles of the symposia from 2001 onwards.

Delta is not an organization, so there are no formal aims or rules. It is a community of academics committed to improving mathematics teaching and learning at university. There is now an international committee and the convener of each symposium forms a local organizing committee. The community has evolved and grown in response to the changing needs of the participants. The concept of change in university mathematics inspired the name, Delta and it has proved a wise choice because in our ten years of existence, many aspects of the environment in which we work have changed.

Each conference has had a different location and a different theme and both these factors have influenced the issues that were presented and discussed. The theme for the first Delta, "What can we do to improve learning", embodied our basic objective but did not specify any particular direction. Unsure of what kinds of issues would emerge as important for our colleagues, we aimed to encourage as many different points of view as possible. At the 1999 Delta, which was held near the Great Barrier Reef, the theme was, "The challenge of diversity", and this inspired many papers to consider the diverse backgrounds of our students, students' diverse thinking and learning styles and the kinds of courses appropriate for them. There were also papers on flexible modes of study offered to large classes and the diverse responses of students to courses involving technology.

Both the first symposia were held in Queensland but the third which was held in the Kruger Park in South Africa, attracted participants from many African countries for whom recent history had magnified the problems of teaching and learning, often in a second language. For the third Delta in 2001 the theme was, "Gearing for flexibility" and as with the previous theme of diversity, many papers addressed flexibility which was frequently made possible by the use of technology. The next Delta in 2003 in Queenstown New Zealand, and the largest Delta in our history, had the theme, "From all angles" and this appeared to encourage a very wide range of topics treated in a variety of ways. It also included Statistics in the title of the symposium for the first time. In 2005 Delta returned to its birthplace, Queensland, this time at Frazer Island and had the theme "Blending beyond the boundaries". Together our themes demonstrate how Delta is always trying to broaden its scope.

The vast majority of papers at all the Deltas described individual courses, materials prepared for them and the responses of students to them. This is not surprising as most participants work at the coalface in university education, teaching or facilitating courses, trying to improve their work and to help others do likewise. Interestingly, papers from U.K. participants tended to focus on cross-university studies and course materials, while in Australia and South Africa, most of the courses described were specific to one institution. However there has been an increasing trend towards papers taking a broader, more theoretical perspective towards teaching, learning, course design and assessment and this has not been the prerogative of the invited speakers.