



## Interview

### Interview with Radha Nathan

AG: What is your current role?

RN: I work with New Zealand Tertiary College and ecelearn, heading the development of the eLearning platform. I oversee the process of system design, development, testing, deployment and maintenance of the Learning Management System (LMS) closely working with the IT manager, Business Analyst and Systems Administrators.

AG: Could you tell me about the factors that have contributed to your leadership role in eLearning?

RN: I completed a Higher Diploma in Software Engineering from National Computer College UK. Initially I just saw the qualification as a great career opportunity but through my studies I found that the career meant more to me in terms of the enjoyment I got out of using technology as a tool to help people. So essentially it is about making people's lives easier.

After completing my qualification I worked for Futurekids Learning Centre in India for a few years. Futurekids is a US based computer training centre for children and adults. Then I moved to New Zealand where I began work with Cherry.bytes as a software developer, and it was through this role that I met Selena Fox, CEO of New Zealand Tertiary College (NZTC).

AG: What was the focus for the Cherry.bytes software development?

RN: Cherry.bytes is computer-based learning - researched, designed and introduced by Kindercare as a unique learning method that complements the New Zealand curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*. Young children could enhance the learning from their centre, through interacting with the software. It was purpose built to connect with the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, so I worked closely with teachers in the software development, designing lesson plans and linking activities to the principles and strands (of *Te Whāriki*). The other important focus for Cherry.bytes was enhancing children's experiences of computer technologies.

I moved from Cherry.bytes to New Zealand Tertiary College in late 2003 to re-join Selena Fox. My new role involved supporting the existing IT team, which at the time was one IT/database administrator, with external consultants doing the majority of work. Now we have our own IT department that is lead by Adrian Borrett our IT Manager, a business analyst, four programmers, one tester, one graphic designer and two systems administrators.

When I started I didn't have a specific role but I guess you could say I was involved in IT solutions and administration ... I had a variety of roles such as web design, providing IT support to staff/students and software development before my role as eLearning Manager. I had the opportunity to design a new website as soon as I joined NZTC and this went live in 2004.



AG: Thinking about eLearning in particular, when did you first become interested in the use of online technologies in education?

RN: That was in 2001, just after I arrived in New Zealand. Through my connections at Cherry.bytes I became involved with the World Forum. Chip Donohue and Selena Fox organised and presented the Early Childhood Faculty Institute on Effective Strategies for Teaching and Learning at a Distance in conjunction with the World Forum on Early Care and Education. It was three days of exploring how to teach using online technologies for eLearning. My role was to support all the delegates with their technology-related needs.

In supporting the delegates I was also participating in the sessions and I saw some intriguing possibilities for eLearning. In particular I got a real sense of the opportunities that eLearning provides. I am from a third world country, and I have seen the difference education can make for someone's standard of living and their life opportunities. I saw how eLearning can reach anyone, anywhere in the world and can make a difference in their lives.

AG: In what ways has NZTC and ecelearn provided a context for you to make a difference to eLearning developments?

RN: Bringing the development in-house has made a huge difference. There are so many eLearning platforms (LMS) in the market right now that are being developed by IT professionals. We are very lucky to work alongside academics and low tech users. This has given us an opportunity to understand their requirements and design a system that works for our users. The significant development for me was that we had our own development team to develop ecelearn, our LMS.

AG: How do you develop your user requirements?

RN: Selena Fox, as the CEO at New Zealand Tertiary College, leads the user requirements, and then we work with academic staff and students. For instance, if we look at a requirement for a community discussion board as a component within our LMS (learning management system) we ask all the people that will be involved, this is very important, because a discussion board for our LMS will be unique to our users, so we need to have a understanding of very particular user requirements to tailor the platform.

It is very interesting working with lecturers. For someone who is constantly working with technology, and has a technical mind, I sometimes struggle to explain things to academics. In our IT world we are very comfortable with the technology; it all comes very easy to us, but for this doesn't necessarily apply to our low-tech users. You can't expect our users to think the same way about even the most routine things.

Working in proximity with the academic staff, I have learnt how much hard work and effort go into designing the curriculum. It is really valuable and important to be able to understand each other so that we can combine teaching and technology to break new ground in eLearning strategies. My experience has taught me the best way to do this is to communicate in simple language, avoiding technical jargon. I learnt this at Cherry.bytes working with both the teachers and the children.

The other important aspect is making sure the tools we provide within our LMS are very easy to use. However, sometimes where I might think



something is very simple, an online tool for instance, it is not in reality easy for a teacher, its not easy enough.

AG: How have you resolved this problem?

RN: At NZTC we have focused on developing our own LMS that is very unique to early childhood teacher training. This has enabled us to create a strong team that works closely with the lecturers. We have many opportunities to sit down with the academic team and discuss their views on the usability of the systems we are developing. This is a huge benefit. We're also lucky enough to be able to get feedback from students, particularly through the development (at NZTC) of the pilot WEDL (Web-Enhanced Distance Learning) program.

We have interviewed five students from the Web Enhanced Distance Learning pilot program to evaluate our LMS. They have really appreciated the usability of the system and the feedback was very positive. They commented that it was easy to use and they never got lost within the system. There was very little they wanted us to (improve) include to enhance the current system mainly requesting assessment resubmissions.

AG: Were the lecturers as easy to work with?

RN: We had trouble at times with some of the expectations of the lecturers, when they ask for certain things that were not technically ideal. What I mean by that is not that we could not design a tool to meet the lecturer's needs; it was more about expectations of how long the design might take. I think sometimes there's a misconception that redesigning an existing tool involves simply changing a few words around on a file, but its far more complex than that.

Even where there have been different expectations the lecturers and designers have always achieved a good compromise. Working on a unique project like this has been fantastic. We have had the opportunity to work closely with the actual users of the system. Within NZTC we are all one big family, supporting each other to achieve our mission 'to empower people to become effective early childhood teachers, who respond to the needs of children and communities by providing comprehensive and professional programs'.

From time to time we have used outside consultancy to support us with technical guidance. We are extremely lucky to have the best of both worlds: close relationships and exposure to the wider industry, essentially huge professional development.

AG: What developments are planned for the LMS?

RN: I'm really excited that Selena Fox, our CEO, has taken the first step by working with lecturers in India to help use online learning technologies to support the development of ECE teacher education programs there. This is important to me because of the benefits of such programs for children in India. NZTC and our LMS can help to ensure children of third world countries experience quality early childhood education. We aim to provide affordable and accessible teacher education through our online learning platform. One key focus for this development has been ensuring the LMS is easy to use across a range of internet connections. It needs to be able to perform at a low bandwidth.



AG: How will the project in India differ from that in New Zealand?

RN: The content/curriculum will be different. We are working with curriculum developers in India to ensure that it reflects the Indian contexts for early childhood education. However the learning platform (LMS) itself will essentially be the same.

AG: Thinking about your past experiences and future developments in eLearning, who and what are the key influences that underpin your personal and professional interests?

RN: Selena Fox and Chip Donohue are the people that have influenced me the most. It started with them and our directors Glennie Oborn and Allan Wendelborn giving me the opportunities through Cherry.bytes, through the World Forum, and through my roles at NZTC. Thinking about my own experiences before I met them, I had some very difficult times in my life where I struggled to make ends meet, and I learnt the importance of education for life opportunities. While in India I worked three jobs so that I could send myself to Aptech, which was run by Apple computers to provide access to the National Computer College UK courses. This experience has heightened my awareness of the opportunities that online learning can provide for people who might never have a chance to leave their country to pursue quality education and training. I look forward to NZTC reaching the global community through eLearning using ecelearn as the learning platform.