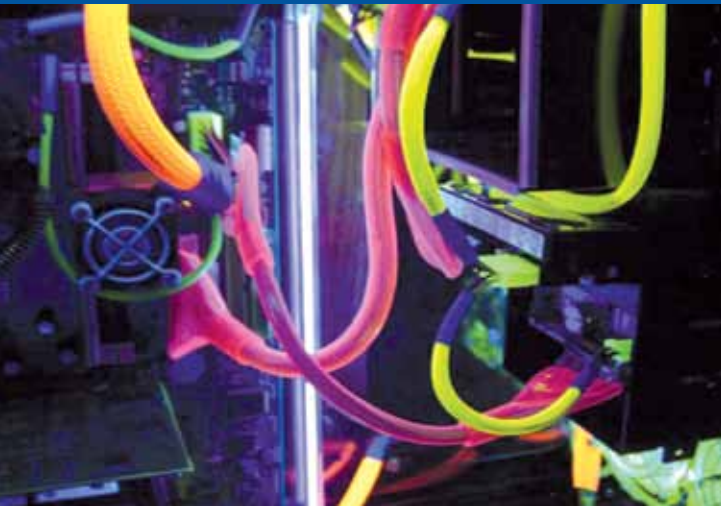


Fostering Online Learning Communities: Empowering People with New Generation Internet Tools



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ISS Institute/TAFE Fellowship

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Executive Summary

Australia's economic future relies on understanding and using the latest high level skills and knowledge. In this age of globalised networked communications, this includes the use of web-based tools to support group creativity and collaboration.

Of particular interest to Menegon and Schutt was the growing and documented gap between the social networking, mobile and other networked collaboration tools that young people are already using as part of their everyday lives, and the lack of use of these tools by, and within, Australian education.

Research reports such as the Inspire Foundation's *Bridging the Digital Divide* report (2007) highlight this dilemma. Often those who work with young people are much more reticent about adopting new technologies as part of their work practices than their charges.

Young people have been given the label 'digital natives' (Prensky, 2001) as opposed to older generations, who are seen as 'digital immigrants', having not grown up with such technologies and, therefore, are seeing them as 'new' or 'foreign', much like previous generations might have seen the telephone or television. Whilst the term 'digital natives' has been subjected to some criticism, it nevertheless points to a generational disconnect about the place of communication technologies in everyday life.

The study program was designed to provide the Fellows with cutting edge knowledge about trends in online social media (Donath, 2004) that they would bring back to Australia and disseminate to their colleagues in education, and implement themselves in their educational work.

The aim of this was to generate new ways of engaging students using the technologies they themselves use every day, and thereby fostering new skill levels in the next generation of the workforce.

Specifically, the core of the study program involved attendance and participation at two technology and community related conferences in Washington DC (*Creativity and Cognition 2007*) and East Lansing, Michigan (*Communities and Technologies*) to learn more about:

- Technical design and development of new generation online education tools
- Latest trends in web-based social networking, and how they apply to education and research
- Leading research and practice into community engagement on the web
- Leading research and practice into the intersection of creativity, cognition and software tools
- Issues surrounding the effects of advanced web technologies on social networks, how they work and how users engage with them.

Some of the topics covered at the conferences included:

- The effects of adult moderators in online youth communities
- Rhetorical strategies for eliciting responses in online communities
- Rhythms of social interaction
- Communities of practice in multi-user games
- Does computer use lead to solitude, participation, or engagement?
- How does a certain type of technology influence, enhance or impede creativity

The following report provides an overview of the Fellowship experience. This is followed by a series of recommendations for government, industry, and the business sector, professional associations, education and training providers, our community and the ISS Institute. These recommendations also include suggestions for engaging in knowledge transfer activities.