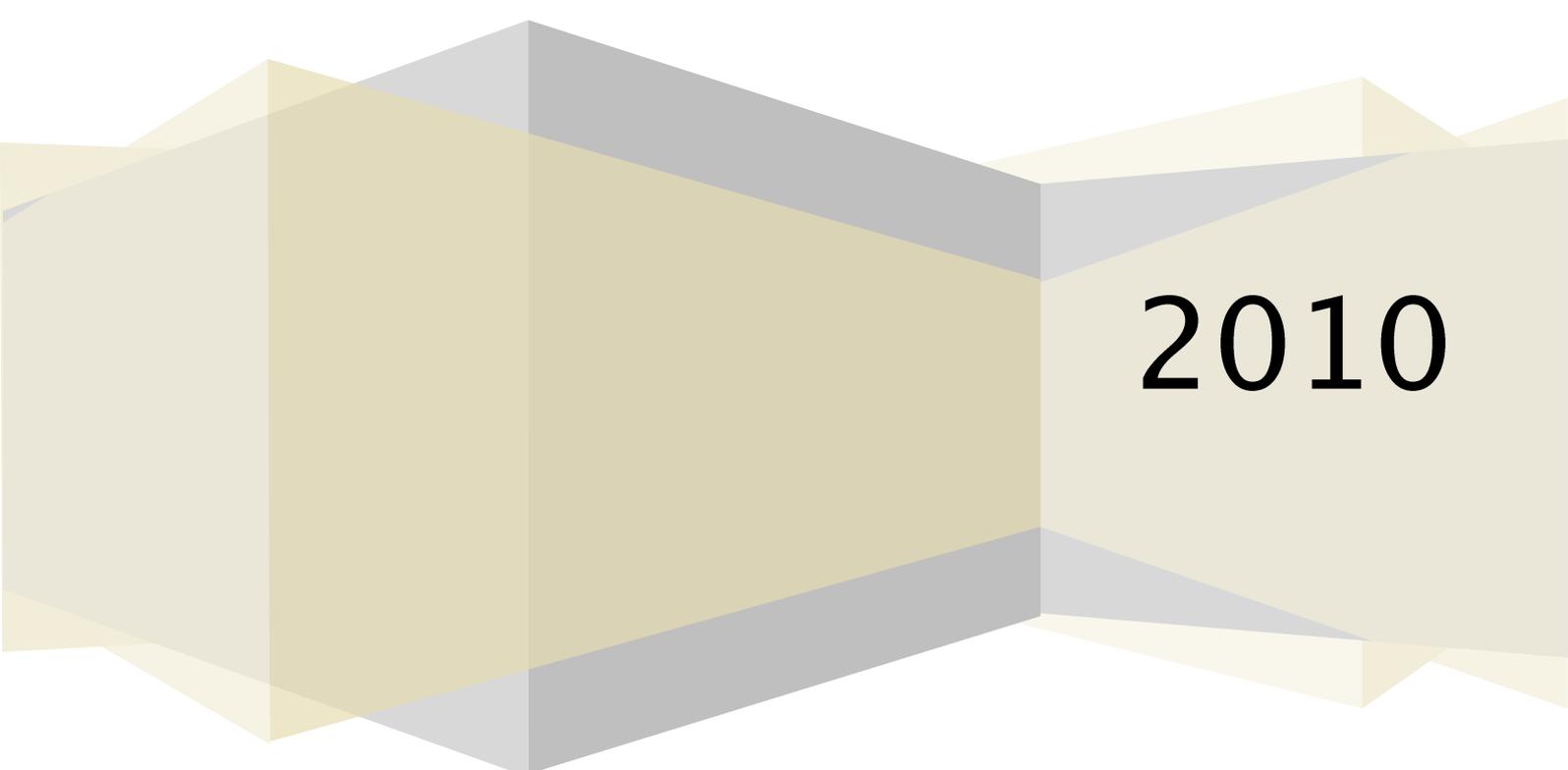


Connecting Kids: Incorporating Online Social Networking into the Primary School Curriculum

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Note: I certify that this report is my original work written predominantly for the purposes of fulfilling the research requirement for course FET8661 in Masters in Education Technology, at the University of Southern Queensland. Some sections of this paper were used for my previous course EDR8000 - Foundations of Contemporary Educational Research Methods – SI, 2009. Other than these courses I have not submitted this material for assessment or grading at this or at any other institution. As the report contains analysis and recommendations which impact on the boarder community, all theories and recommendations are intellectual property of Rachael Bath, the author, unless otherwise cited.

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ABSTRACT

Across Australia, and the world, there are teachers and students who are geographically separated from the school. Generally speaking these absences are often inconvenient and an interruption to the sequential teaching and learning occurring in the classroom. In a classroom where online collaboration and learning occurs as routine these absences have less impact on teachers and students. This is due to the availability of classroom activities and resources being online. As teachers develop their skills, understandings and the capabilities of the internet, and web 2.0 technologies, such as blogs and wikis, they are more likely to implement them into their regular classroom practices. Throughout my teaching career, which spans over a decade, I have observed many skilful and dynamic teachers in their classrooms, but never have I come across any teacher who has overcome the difficulties and interruptions to continuous and sequential teaching and learning due to absenteeism and the notion of diminished connectedness for students.

Along with the implementation of an online environment in primary schools, many other issues are raised when researching this framework. These include, but are not limited to: access to infrastructure and hardware, social capital, internet related security such as access and cyber bullying, and the assessment of educational value.

1. KEY WORDS

Social Networking, Collaborative Learning Environments, Innovative Education, Student Connectedness, Anywhere-Anytime Learning, Web 2.0 Technologies

2. INTRODUCTION TO THE ISSUE

Absenteeism in primary schools, in Australia, has become an increasing issue. Students absent from school for any period are generally affected; this could range in terms of academia, socialization and coping with 'catching-up'. In schools across Victoria the *It's not OK to be away*, (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2009) concept has been adopted and enforced. Schools advertise to their community that absenteeism for any period of time without legitimate reason is unacceptable, but on the occasions where there are legitimate reasons for absence we need to develop a comprehensive and manageable set of strategies to support both teachers and students to maintain a sequential flow of learning. To provide unprecedented support to students at this critical stage of their education, primary schools need to be proactive in offering an innovative and accessible and manageable alternative to maintain the student's education.

To overcome this void in Australia's education system provisions for collaborative learning must be established. Studies of learning practices show that collaboration within learning is an important characteristic, and enhances the exchange of ideas and understandings. Collaborative learning (whether it is conventional or virtual) encourages meaningful and significant support by participants sharing knowledge and concepts. Online collaborative learning allows this to occur anywhere-anytime and thus maintains connectedness between students and their teacher in a school setting. The concept of an online collaborative learning area enables students who are absent to participate in the classroom learning. This is an alternative to the global educational web sites that students might access with little or no alignment to their classroom learning and no input or connection with the teacher or school. I investigate the viability of teachers maintaining these learning tools along with the everyday operations in their classroom. I have experienced insights into the benefits of the collaborative learning environments including: students maintain their academic progress in line with those students who attend conventional face-to-face classes; and the improvement of computer use and related technologies through immersion in technology. An innovation such as this will provide a solution to the current void.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The implications of this study are to present recommendations, based on my narrative inquiry and predominantly Australian research articles, answering my research questions:

- 3.1 How might online social networking be embedded into the primary curriculum to improve student learning outcomes and connectedness?*
- 3.2 What impact does online social networking have on today's primary school students and the curriculum?*
- 3.3 How might online social networks be used to promote positive experiences for all primary students?*

Any collaborative learning environment that is inclusive in this manner will enable the student to maintain a connection with their school, teacher and class. This research will be beneficial information for education departments across Australia to encourage further investment and investigation into this teaching and learning strategy.

Social networking is a part of every human's development and being. From birth, children begin developing an understanding of their social network, beginning with family and friends. Being a part of a network and having a social place is developed throughout our life, and crucial to continued growth as a productive community member.

When Tim Berners-Lee developed the internet in 1990, he was providing a resource for information to be passed across the world; he never believed the notion of real-time collaboration would occur so easily. As internet access and cyber awareness develops in children, the websites they access, also develop. The Australian Communications and Media Authority's qualitative research in (2009, p. 6) found that many sites broadly termed social networking sites are also referred to as many other terms, for example: chat-rooms, forums, and blogs. Many of the multi-player game websites such as Club Penguin [<http://play.clubpenguin.com/>] (Disney Online Studios Canada Inc, 2010) and SuperClubs PLUS [<http://www.superclubsplus.com/>] (Intuitive Media , 2010) are classed as interacting with other players but not considered social networking by the participants, as they perceived it as being just a part of the game.

When I discuss a social networking site I am not either solely referring to the widely known interfaces such as MySpace [<http://www.myspace.com/>] (MySpace, 2003-2010), Facebook [<http://www.facebook.com/>] (Facebook, 2010), MSN messenger [<http://people.live.com>] (Microsoft Corporation, 2010) and the like, nor am I either referring to commercially-produced, educational-based sites such as SuperclubsPLUS and Smartkiddies [<http://www.smartkiddies.com.au>] (Smartkiddies, 2008). I am in fact predominantly referring to teacher developed blog and Wiki sites or learner management systems with private participant access. Although, I do consider the commercial applications of the above stated sites could be used in combination with the personally developed 'private' blogs and/or wikis, which can be set up free of any charges.

Throughout this research I have come across numerous articles and papers written about online education encompassing distance education through to virtual schools. I found that for each paper I read more and more issues were raised, this opened my research topic up to a much broader scope. Therefore, I have contained this report to the specifics of implementing online social networking into the primary curriculum, as this is where all of my experiences, as a teacher, researcher and a mother lay. I embrace the notion that all of these broader threads are intertwined and interrelated, and without one, another could be compromised, so to ensure synthesis and credibility, I have briefly touched upon some issues and areas but not discussed them in depth due to the constraints of this report. Also for this reason I have, for the most part focused on using Australian research to ensure validity of my arguments in the context of Australian primary schools.

4. METHODOLOGY

In the social sciences research ethnography is the investigation of people and interpreting their world and the way they live and interact with each other and their environment. Where the inquiry involves individuals trying to make sense of theirs' and others' worlds the importance of selecting thoughtful and well designed investigations is paramount. Researchers must collect data with plausibility and honesty whilst maintaining the integrity and professionalism of the research.

The considerations underpinning this research are the ontological and epistemological philosophies pertaining to empiricism. Socialization and social networking is the fundamental human process of how we learn to grow and develop from a new-born to a child and adult. We observe, interpret and make attempts at new experiences with the use of our five senses; we then make sense of experiences and thus learn. This is the most valuable process in the human life. Teachers also use empirical analysis as a process of data collection by observation where they are able to make anecdotal notes for future interpretation of their students, interpret the learning and provide experiences to develop comprehension and understanding. As Cortazzi (1993, Transferred to digital Printing 2003) discusses in his book:

Teachers' thoughts, perceptions, beliefs and experiences are all aspects of teachers' culture which we need to know about and be aware of as a key factor in education, especially in times of change. Yet this crucial aspect of education is probably undervalued and certainly under researched...An increasing number of scholars are suggesting, however, that narrative research offers a way for us to hear teachers' voices and begin to understand their culture from the inside.

This review draws upon extensive literature research in which I have explored and developed a sound understanding of the needs of primary education, the desire of children in the focus age group to feel connected with known peers and adults, and the uses of social networking as a teaching and learning tools. A combination of the literature review and my narrative experiences will form a comprehensive response to each of the research questions, and address any refuting arguments in an appropriate manner.

In recent times in Australia, and particularly Victoria, there have been several research studies completed in the areas of the internet, online learning and access to Information Communication Technologies. The research by the Australian Communications and Media Authority's media release (2009) and can be linked to the Australian Government's Cyber safety Policy.

The methodology of narrative analysis is much more than an observation and analysis of everyday experiences. It is the understanding of life, life experiences and making sense of them in the research context, and making connections between the ontological and epistemological considerations of the research. With narrative research the immersion into the experiences, developing of relationships with the environment and making philosophical connections through participation in and observation, gives an authenticity to my experiences and analysis. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) describe the experience for the narrative researchers as being one where they hardly know *what to make of this [experience] without knowing the narrative threads at work. Those threads are complex and difficult to disentangle.*

When applying a narrative analysis philosophy it is imperative the researcher draws distinction between story and narrative, just as research and evaluation have very strong connections in that they are both records of events throughout the research they are situated at different locations along the timeline of the whole project. As Holly (2005) describes the research component is a first-hand account of actual events that occur. In contrast, narrative analysis involves the researcher experiencing the situation first-hand. With narrative research, notes regarding being in the *midst of an inquiry space* are taken and then later analysed in the context of the narrative *threads* as describe above by Candinin and Connolly (2000). This process of evaluation and analysis is deciphering and making sense of the research notes and developing a set of outcomes, recommendation and conclusions. Court (2004) sights Vygotsky (1962) stating that *to understand other people's speech we need to understand not only their words but their motivation.* In the context of educational research and evaluation this concept is exceptionally accurate in that for every conclusion drawn from research there must be some context and evidence provided to ensure credibility towards them. The words can arise from any source and without knowing or understanding the meaning or motivation behind them in the context, this has the potential to be misconstrued and therefore the researcher and their research losing credibility. Meaning is personal, and meaning is realized through the connections with others.

In the field of memory reflection the emerging socio-cultural and narrative practice theory explores

how communities participate in defining the meaning of lived experiences. In my research I am able to establish a solid foundation for the use of the narrative auto-ethnographic theory of research as I have been immersed in the field of primary education for the past 10 years and have actively participated in professional discussions and researching the field of online resources to support continuous learning for all students. The area of study I am particularly focusing on is the connectedness of students with their teacher and peers through both face-to-face and online learning, and the contentious issue of absenteeism. Bond (2009) quotes the work of Pate (2008) in his discussion of *a recent evaluation of community learning support programs* [which] *found that while academic improvement occurred with sustained attendance, more immediate improvement included increased interest in learning, confidence, homework completion and learning skill.*

In this research I review literature that pertains to the particular use of online learning support programs which are specific to the class and teacher, and available to both absent and present students to provide a comprehensive account of learning that has occurred, whilst supporting ‘anywhere-anytime’ learning, and the viability of social network sites as online places for this learning.

This empirical account and literature review will draw conclusions in relation to the research questions. The analysis of this information will incorporate a number of research theories, such as critical review, and the philosophical understandings of epistemology and ontology. As with all studies in the social sciences this issue is complex and will draw upon a variety of sources and experiences to develop a comprehensive report.

5. CONTEXT

Students in primary schools are of the age known as digital Natives [born after 1990]. For these and any future children the internet and associated web 2.0 technologies are a regular part of their daily lives. They have grown up with this technology. Children begin to use the internet in primary school, and as teachers, our understanding and competencies must improve, and to have skills commensurate with those of the students we must make regular use of it, both at home and school. Furthermore, to support this learning more schools must be obliged to provide laptops and a greater student to computer ratio.

As the use of the internet expands, so too does new interests, hobbies and relationships develop. As the Australian Communications and Media Authority’s Qualitative research report (2009, p. 25) identifies *children and young people have also grown up at a time when the internet and web 2.0 technologies are used as a key communication and information tool, thus, it is natural for children and young people to use the internet for socializing as well.*

In the past communication was predominantly via telephones, letters or face-to-face. Now the options offered by the internet and online social networking provide communication links as with the telephone once did, but with the added benefits of visual connections such as MSN messenger and Skype.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority’s Qualitative research (2009, p. 25) found current benefits are:

5.1 Being able to talk to several friends at once

5.2 Being able to socialize while doing other activities such as homework; and

5.3 A means of interaction with people whom these students may not interact with in person.

We know from this information that the importance of connecting via the internet is of utmost importance, not only for social connectedness, but also for learning and developing. In the present day

classroom, I have observed the fact that the internet is predominantly used as a research tool where students seek information, interpret the findings and present this as research and online assessment. The impact of this is; students become disengaged and often deviate from the task or lose concentration. In contrast, when they are engaged in interactive activities, learning is evident and engagement is sustained. My experiences have proven that the most engaging activities for primary school students involve physical interaction with the task, other participants (peers), and technology. When collaborative learning occurs deeper understanding eventuates. Students seek knowledge and understanding from the world around them, this includes the new “world” of the internet and exploring the tools involved in interacting with others to expand their knowledge.

With the facilities the internet provides to interact anywhere-anytime, students have the opportunity to continue their classroom learning beyond the school gates. When I implement the use of web based homework tasks I have had a greater rate of participation than traditional forms of homework, because it is not perceived as homework or unrelated to classroom learning. In addition to this when students are able to contact peers and/or teachers for further information; comprehension is greater and more authentic. This investigation seeks broader understanding of epistemological and ontological considerations when implementing online social networking in the primary school curriculum.

6. ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS

6.1 How might online social networking be embedded into the primary curriculum to improve student learning outcomes and connectedness?

As in Ethrington’s (2008) report, I agree that, consideration of the technical environment, and in particular the education and schooling of young children, the appropriateness of a radical critique of online pedagogy, is both imminent and necessary. In today’s society there is more and more focus on technology and improving skills in line with the developing technology. Education and schools play a significant role in this skill development. Teachers are expected to understand technology and implement it into meaningful learning experiences for their students no matter how young they are. Teachers must maintain a high standard of foundation education to ensure all students are equipped with the skills and tools to become effective members of the community. When teachers are faced with frequent or long term student absences from the classroom they are challenged to ensure all the standards are met, as set by the governing education department. This problem can be overcome through the implementation of social networking and virtual learning environments, which provide all students with the opportunity to connect to their school and their education anywhere-anytime and the teacher, can monitor progress and maintain connection through personal messages and podcasts/vodcasts that the students can freely access on the class blog or wiki.

When teachers are able to continue their conventional methods of teaching and additionally produce a technological parallel for online collaborative learning my epistemological theory becomes a seamless and innovative transition. As a researcher in the field of education and a teacher for more than 10 years I foresee the use of collaborative learning environments and social networking sites to be vastly contrary to the beliefs that implementing innovative curriculum such as social networking is time consuming and difficult. Teachers can implement their conventional classroom practices, such as a demonstration, have it recorded digitally, and then upload to a class blog or wiki for use by the teacher or students as frequently or repeatedly, as necessary, without any further demand neither on the restricted teaching time, nor with compromise to the already crowded curriculum. I recognize that a part of innovation is failure; there is more failure, and therefore we must expect difficulties and modifications to occur throughout the implementation process. Innovation can also be stifled by educational and diversity challenges. Social networking in primary school education will go a long way towards fostering an environment where innovation occurs. Unless we have education modernization, we will not get what we want – an education system that caters wholly for all students

without impact of absence or connective infrastructure.

I have *walked in the midst*, and *lived life on the landscape* of the educational world (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I have firsthand experience with incorporating the digital world as a curriculum strategy. I have seen many students embrace online technologies; this was especially evident in 2009 when the Year 6 students at the school I was working were participants in the first year of a three year netbook 1:1 trial. This involved all students leasing a DEECD issue netbook which was their own personal computer to use for school work and for homework. The freedom extended to the availability of the netbooks to the students for “recreational use”. This trial involved my daughter; therefore, I am fortunate enough to have observations and experiences of both the classroom applications and the home experiences of the student. With this insight I was able to observe and analyse the use of social networking and online communication as the main use of the netbooks outside of school tasks and the importance these connections have on the students.

A variety of studies have been undertaken in the area of social capital as an interdisciplinary research field. This presents a framework for understanding temporal communities and groups. They are used in the social science research to understand social network structures. This framework has been widely described as a method for determining patterns of social disparity created by lack of technological skills in society and the benefits to those who possess such skills. Studies of learning practices show that collaboration within learning is an important characteristic and enhances the exchange of ideas and understandings. Collaborative learning whether they are virtual or temporal encourages meaningful and significant support by sharing knowledge. Online collaborative learning allows this to occur anywhere-anytime and thus maintains connectedness between students and teacher within an authentic setting.

This analysis is also pertinent to my research and classroom observations. As the implications for these factors to have real impact upon the implementations of social networking and online collaborative learning as a valid and viable teaching and learning strategy. As Daniel, Schwier, and McCalla, (2003) discuss *little research has been done to extend the understanding of social capital from the physical world to virtual communities*. As the development of virtual communities expand the application of a social capital framework becomes more admissible in understanding communication and learning in virtual settings. I have researched virtual learning for several years and have read many reports. I have made many attempts to implement this technology into my classroom practices with varying degrees of success – but a learning experience none the less. From this knowledge and experience I have developed a clear understanding that social capital and its disparity is evident and must be addressed before thorough and comprehensive implementation can occur. The success of implementing social networking into the primary curriculum is dependent upon a number of factors, as with the implementation of any innovative curriculum initiatives.

The fundamental factors I have identified and recommended are:

- 6.1.1 Schools, teachers and students must have equality in resources – or access to them; the technical infrastructure must exist; and knowledge and education of teachers must be comparable.
- 6.1.2 The learning must be guided with specific outcomes and aligned with the governing curriculum. This is where the implementation of programs diversifies initiatives and the teachers’ individual skills and preferences influence outcomes.
- 6.1.3 Dependent upon the learning outcomes, prior experience and the age of the students, teachers could begin with the introduction of blogs and/or wikis to empower students to connect and participate. Then, further expand the implementation depending upon the progress and uptake of these strategies by the students.
- 6.1.4 Teachers can easily set up digital video cameras in the classroom or have the students holding a video camera – during an instruction session, which would then be uploaded to the class blog or wiki; alternatively, students could make instructional videos of their learning. These can then be used and reused for continued instruction or revision throughout the year(s). The valuable experience of allowing students to become the

teacher empowers them and demonstrates their knowledge of the task – and can be later used as assessment of the learning.

- 6.1.5 Ensuring the availability of these resources to all students to review and complete set tasks which could be posted to the site for peer evaluation and friendly critique, which must be taught explicitly to ensure appropriate comments are made.

Although this may initially be a steep learning curve for teachers, it is important to remain positive and optimistic about this new format of teaching. During difficulties it is imperative that Principals and school administrators remain supportive.

In today's society there is increased focus, by all levels of community, to develop a knowledge society, and developing skills in line with the emerging technology. Education and schools play the most fundamental role in skill development. Teachers are expected to understand technology, implement it into meaningful learning experiences for their students no matter how young they are, and maintain a high standard of foundation education to ensure all students are equipped with the skills and tools to ensure they become effective members of the wider community. The implementation of blogs/wikis is the easiest way for the teacher to set up a collaborative learning environment and, as students develop their skills they become the authors of the site.

When teachers are faced with challenges such as student absence, they are further pressured to ensure all the standards are met. Dr Glen Russell (2007, p. 8) discusses the discipline of [geographically] *distant education as continuing to develop* and as teachers review these practices they must consider the epistemology that underpins the use of collaborative learning environments. My endeavours through this research and classroom practice are to develop a best practice model for an open learning format where anywhere-anytime learning is available to all students regardless of their attendance at a conventional school. As our world changes we adapt. As education and the resources and infrastructure of the internet change, we must also adapt and make the most of these resources.

When making the initial transition from the traditional classroom environment and activities to the contemporary online world, teachers should reflect upon the activities they currently implement and their collaborative nature. When using online posts and resources for student learning, the activities must also be relevant, and aligned to the specific learning goals of the task, and students' needs, as is the expectation in conventional teaching.

6.2 *What impact does online social networking have on today's primary school students and the curriculum?*

Education is a fundamental aspect of growing up and developing foundations for lifelong skills. As the importance of this is realized by world leaders, teachers are increasingly held accountable for their ability or failure to substantially educate children and provide them with the skills to operate effectively in the community. To assist teachers in achieving these goals, in 2007 the Australian Labour Party developed an election policy *a Digital Education Revolution* where it states that *to have the best job and life opportunities in the future, Australian students must receive a world class education today* (Rudd, Smith, & Conroy, 2007). They also acknowledge that along with the providing finances to establish the *Digital Education Revolution*, the challenges of school engagement and attendance also must be addressed. They envisage this to be attained through the development of online curriculum resources for all students, access to training for teachers that enables them to embed these technologies, the broadband infrastructure and portals for increased student and parental involvement with the education, namely the *Ultraset - A centralized Learning Management System (LMS)*. Recently in Australia and New Zealand there has been the development of the *Le@rning Federation* (Rudd, Smith, & Conroy, 2007) that is assisting with the development of more online content, namely *Digilearn*. In the period between 2006 and 2008 the federation agreed to produce content for all Australian and New Zealand schools. As it stands in the Victorian Department of

Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) the “*UltraneT*” will manage the learning, via the internet, of all state school children (Brown, 2009) is still in its infancy and the *Digilearn* resources that are currently online for all teachers and students to access have proven to be a very valuable resource. My experiences have found these resources are somewhat limited in their topics, particularly for the primary school context, as they were developed several years ago, and in our world of instant updates, these are already outdated and superseded.

When I discuss my experiences and experiments with collaborative learning environments, I am describing an environment, usually a blog or wiki, which is continually being added to and all students and their teachers involved participate in the information delivery and updating resources. The use of self-established sites in combination with commercial sites, such as [SuperclubsPLUS](#) (Intuitive Media , 2010), [Smartkiddies](#) (Smartkiddies, 2008), [MSN messenger](#) (Microsoft Corporation, 2010), or [Twitter](#) (Twitter, 2010) can provide a solid foundation for structuring all educational activities, whilst enhancing the ability and potential for students to develop knowledge in a collaborative manner. Other alternatives to learner manager system such as [Blackboard](#) (Blackboard, 1997-2010), [Moodle](#) (Moodle Trust, 1991) and [Wimba](#) (Horizon Wimba, 2008) are also commercially produced, but in these cases the content and access can be contained to ‘enrolled’ participants. These are collaborative environments where leaning and connections take place on a regular basis. I have used Moodle and Wimba extensively during my studies with great success and I found them both to have positive interactive qualities.

MacIntyre and Canale, (2009) recognize the *pedagogy behind blogs, wikis and podcasts, on how online collaborative environments might engage students and enhance student learning, is an increasing focus for researchers (Dalglish, 2006; Donohoo, 2006). Labbo (2006) examines what constitutes effective teacher directed teaching and learning in school settings, to identify a productive theoretical model that underpins successful literacy development. She identifies authentic and motivating reasons to communicate through collaborative software as a positive, as are the critical skills involved in working across modalities.*” The options for teachers are varied and need to be considered thoroughly. From my experiences considerations such as the following must be addressed for social networking to be successfully implemented, with positive impact on teacher, student learning and the delivery of education.

- 6.2.1 The skills and knowledge of the teachers as online citizens and having the competence to impart these upon their students in a competent and responsible manner.
- 6.2.2 The age group of the students, their understanding of key factors such as, global citizenship, cyber bullying and the responsibilities they have to these issues. This could include identifying and reporting known cyber bullying behaviours and differentiating themselves from these activities. Also the notion that as a global citizen their comments can be potentially accesses by anyone and sent around the world in seconds.
- 6.2.3 The prior knowledge and skill of the students must be considered thoroughly. As the primary school students are digital natives, chances are they may have prior experience that teachers are unaware of although must cater for. The potential for students to be more knowledgeable and able to learn about new sites and tools more efficiently and effectively than their teachers must also be recognized.
- 6.2.4 Infrastructure and access to hardware and software by all students (equity of resources). This encompasses both at school and home. It would not be viable for example, for all homework tasks be posted online if not 100% of students in the class had access to the internet at home.
- 6.2.5 Time to interact with the site, to participate in the experience and to provide exemplary quality teaching and learning within this contemporary environment must be provided during school time and with teacher participation outside of school hours. This then establishes positive relationships which can be the foundation for sound collaborative learning.

In Yates’ (2003) discussion, she identifies that the use of today’s technologies empower the teacher

and the learner to use modalities that encourage learning at *anytime and in anyplace*. Ang and Wang (2006) also go on to discuss the impact of using technologies in empowering underachieving students to engage in their learning and develop a comprehensive understanding of abstract concepts. Their research showed that the students were engaged in the learning and the information presented in the virtual space was accurate. Essentially, a collaborative learning environment is a suite of software to enable educators to manage online learning in a coherent way. Within a collaborative learning environment, various combinations of “tools” are provided to support the design of course programs and create a variety of learning experiences.

Nowadays, most collaborative learning environment software is installed on a web server such as the *Ultraset* and can therefore be accessed via the internet at anytime. Depending on the policy and practices of the school, college or educational organization, access to the collaborative learning environment and enrolment into course programs will have varying restrictions.

When investigating the moral implications of this form of education, there were as many negative references towards online learning for young children as those in support. Etherington (2008) reports that, computers and the internet actually connect children to *trivial games, inappropriate adult content and aggressive advertising*. Distance education technology promotes the opposite of what children need – close relationships with caring adults. Contrary to this statement and generalization, the ontological implementation of collaborative learning environments will allow a continued relationship and connectedness to the teacher and class any time.

In MacIntyre and Canale’s (2009) research into collaborative online learning communities they report *students value the opportunity to communicate with teachers online, many finding it easier to communicate precisely, with privacy and without interruption or competition from other students*. The learning becomes increasingly individual based and self directed. Many found it easier to communicate with their teacher online, because online communication was: *less formal; easier to initiate, private, clearer and more accurate, and convenient*. Another epiphenomenon of the collaborative online communities was, students observed *that they were able to complete homework tasks more quickly, and were more confident about their own work, than when they were not working online...for these students, their online social interacts were effortlessly interspersed with online learning tasks*. These outcomes from an Australian study are pertinent to my observations and beliefs as they confirm the positive impact of online learning and social networking for primary school students. And, the students’ ability to display knowledge and skills that might have previously been suppressed with teacher directed classroom based ‘chalk-and-talk’ lessons.

6.3 How might online social networking be used to promote positive experiences for all primary school students?

With widespread use and development of information communication technologies that support collaborative learning and virtual environments there is a parallel need to introduce general structures, such as that of social capital, to address social and technological issues alike in all levels of society. Research suggests that although social capital is a philosophy largely based on social interactions, it is actually a complex arrangement of interactions between a number of factors – *“these include social network structures, trust between participants, exchange and participation among all parties, common values and norms, shared understandings and cooperation”* (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003).

When students are disengaged with their learning I have found that in most cases attendance at school similarly declines. Thus making an online location where students are engaged with their learning and able to communicate freely with peers and teachers, during any period of absence, are supportive of the students needs. Student connectedness, being the level of engagement and perceived notion of connectedness, is becoming such an issue in the rural Victorian schools I have worked at. These terms and indicators are dominating many schools *Charter Documents* and *Strategic Implementation Plans*.

The indicator for the need of this focus is the students' *Attitude towards School* survey, which is administered each year. The data from this indicates that as attitude declines, so does engagement, participation in school activities, and attendance.

In my class I have been successful in reducing this negative data through incorporating online activities such as social networking, collaborative tasks and authentic learning experiences – both in the classroom and as homework tasks. As humans and professionals we understand that for every experience we have there can be both positive and negative connotations. As teachers we must provide guidance towards the learning activities for our students, without compounding any pre-existing issues such as disruptive home environments, schoolyard bullying, family holidays or illness. Therefore, being supportive in this manner shows compassion and understanding for the student's educational and personal needs.

When implementing any program, the above issues must be considered, although with online learning some of these factors can have a reduced impact or may even be eliminated. In the education of young students the personal links between themselves, peers and teachers is imperative in maintaining the connection with their learning. The Victorian Auditor General's Office (2004) report found that absence from school *clearly affects the absent student, but can also affect students who attend regularly. High absenteeism rates for a class or school can disrupt a teacher's ability to plan and present class work in a sequential and organized way.* This can affect the progress of all students in the class and can make the class difficult to manage. The experiences of both teacher and students in an online environment needs not be anything dissimilar to that of a conventional classroom, other than the extension of the access to resources and the collegiate interactions outside of school hours. The experience allows the students to develop stronger relationships with each other and their teacher.

As with any environment whether it is online or contemporary there are always safety and relationship considerations. As I have mentioned above the notion of being a global citizen in any online environment has its implications, all participants must be aware of their rights and responsibilities of participating in an acceptable manner and reporting occurrences or events that may have negative connotations. It is important to make this explicit upon the introduction of any online activity where interactions occur. The distinction between something that is said in jest is not always interpreted in this manner, must be explained, as the online environment is largely anonymous and when we are communicating face-to-face we take into consideration body language and facial expressions; when online there are no other elements to draw upon other than emoticons, which are not a reliable source of information in relation to the true meaning of the message. In the online social networking world teachers can expect that students will develop skills and curiosity about wider social networking. Therefore, as we encourage this collaboration we must also be vigilant in preparing students for the situations that may arise. The Australian Communications and Media Authority's Qualitative research (2009, p. 8) discusses the risks of online contact as perceived by the students; *while predator risks are forefront in children and young people's minds, other risks potentially arising from online content are not an active concern. Those of primary school age (8 – 12 years) did not actively seek or desire contact with people they do not know and mostly interact with their close-knit circle of friends at school. For them, the danger of contact is not as "real" or likely to happen while under close supervision from parents.* Similarly, students of the age group in question are generally not enthusiastic about communicating with strangers in a face-to-face environment – thus maintaining their personal safety and integrity.

In reference to cyber bullying the Australian Communications and Media Authority's Qualitative report (2009, p. 39) discusses the events encountered by children. Stating: *Cyber bullying was most likely to occur amongst teenagers. Children aged 8 – 12 years may have experienced 'name calling' or 'silly remarks',* reportedly nothing that would be considered bullying or taken seriously, cyber bullying becomes more prevalent at high school.

If we begin to educate students about these issues at a young age the prevalence of it may be reduced in future years. I would hasten to predict an abolishment of cyber bullying as bullying remains an issue in the face-to-face world and will therefore exist in the online world; needless to say it can be

substantially reduced if early education and intervention is systematically and consistently applied. This would be another positive by-product of the proposed online education and social network I am discussing.

7. SYNTHESIS

If we manage this correctly with policy, financial and infrastructure support, we will hopefully see not just the boom of online learning, but also the boom of a student-centric education system that provides every student - regardless of attendance, income, or learning preferences - a rich set of learning experiences.

The reality is that the true potential of being a 'digital native' is completely untapped in schools under the current model and structure. We reference digital natives and just assume that their abilities to be comfortable in using technology will happen simply with the student's own intuition and no teaching support. It doesn't work this way, my experiences validate that students need to be instructed correctly; then practice to be good at something the same way that athletes have to practice to be great at their sport, and musicians to compose music.

In my mind, being a digital native only holds value if students are surrounded by the technology and offered opportunities to develop that knowledge base, Governments, policy makers, education administrators and teachers must consider the following question in relation to these innovative learning technologies: Do you really think that a student who attends a technologically integrated school is not exponentially more proficient in utilizing technology applications than the student who uses technology once a week? We must provide for these students to ensure their long-term presence in our community, once students leave the classroom, and *have the best job and life opportunities in the future* (Rudd, Smith, & Conroy, 2007).

Once students leave the classroom, students should continue to question their knowledge and comprehension of the class activities, homework, or just sharing of information. The first and foremost inclination for many digital immigrants is always to use e-mail as a primary collaboration tool. As I sit and think about all of the new tools that are available, it is important that we, as educators, begin to understand and utilize these web 2.0 technologies in our classrooms so that students develop the ability to collaborate with each other using platforms other than e-mail. This type of learning experience makes total sense and allows for students to develop stronger relationships with each other and the teacher. From this teachers can create a collaborative working environment where teachers and students work together and support each other with the instruction and online applications.

This type of relationship is only successful if students and their teachers develop a relationship based on trust where students feel comfortable showing the teachers new things and teachers are willing to learn from their students, in effect this situation the roles of student and teacher would be reversed. Having the mindset that the teacher is the centre of all information and wisdom of all topics will only stunt learning and prevent students from reaching their full potential, as well as being untrue.

One of the biggest advantages of social networking platforms is that teachers and students alike get to engage in discussions. Not for a minute do I suggest online Social Networking should replace engaging in conversation with our students and fellow teachers, but to the contrary. We must maintain the best aspects of conventional schooling and education, whilst incorporating the best practice in online Social Networking and Web 2.0 technologies.

It is evident the gap is widening between the teachers using technology for educational and personal purposes and those who are not. This also means that the gap between their students is widening simultaneously. Technology is an engaging tool that is used predominantly as second nature, to

students and, although it should rarely be the focal point of learning, it is unarguably a powerful tool in “hooking in” reluctant students to learning and providing a means for delivering the information in a manner conducive to that student’s learning needs. The implications of this are that schools become partnerships in education rather than the providers of it, and therefore, implementing a model of best practice for these teaching and learning strategies.

8. CONCLUSION

A narrative analysis personalizes the research and places value on the personal experiences. As I involve myself in the research of the issue at hand I am none too aware of the overwhelming information in regards to the use – both supporting and refuting – the value of the internet and web based programs as educational tools. Through my experiences I have noted much research with vast realms of information and little or no action plan for implementation of the advised strategies. My research predominantly is based around Australian work by Australian authors. The reason for this is to develop an authentically Australian set of strategies and implementation plans for the incorporation of online social networking as valuable and viable learning tools. The experiences I have had as a primary school teacher and in particular an ICT specialist I have excellent credentials for developing and auto-ethnographical account of this field.

These tools are being used by students already at home. Not implementing them into the classroom is a legitimate problem which must be addressed. As teachers continue to develop relationships with their students, I would urge them to make these platforms an integral part of their classroom practices. Then, not only will their students learn from the teacher, but it creates the invaluable opportunity for them to learn from each other.

The interactive content and collaborative learning environments I have discussed helps students stay on task and foster learning and engagement. I implore teachers to discover how they can empower greater learning and collaboration, deliver engaging and stimulating whole-class teaching across the curriculum, all with interactive digital learning environments and web 2.0 technologies.

I have established that online social networking can be used as an extension to classroom teaching and as a tool to encourage communication and inquisitiveness among students, with the overarching objective of enhancing teaching and learning by improving both teacher-student and student-student communication, and, in so doing, bridging the home-school divide.

In fact, social networking online has rapidly become the principal means of communication for the current generation of teenagers, and many pre-teens. It is, after all, what they do on their mobile phones and other hand-held devices under their desks when we teachers are not looking. This is what they do as soon as they get home from school. So, I propose we use this to implement an innovative and engaging curriculum to the primary school students of Australia.

Many will argue that most students are just wasting their time and gossiping online but, whatever anyone’s opinion on the benefits or dangers of social networking is, it cannot be denied that they are all sharing, collaborating and networking and they are doing so in a way which they enjoy and find engaging, otherwise they simply would not do it.

Pedagogy needs to reflect these social changes and conform to the needs and expectations of today’s students and, if we teach them in a way that mirrors how they live their lives when they are not in school, if we help to ensure that the gap between their school life and home life is minimized, we then become better able to guarantee the connectedness and engagement of the vast majority of our students, and thus educate students appropriately for their future.

9. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Collaborative Learning Environment	An online location where participants have input and receive feedback upon works and comments posted to the site.
Digital Immigrant	Anyone born before the beginning of 1990 and continues to develop skills in the natural use of the internet and associated technologies.
Digital native	A person born after the beginning of 1990 and have been brought up in a community using the internet and associated technologies.
Emoticons	A textual expression representing the face of a writer's mood or facial expression i.e. :) =☺ [smile] and ;) = wink.
Netbook	A small computer with approximately 10” screen leased out to students by the Department of Education and Early childhood Development (DEECD) for a 3 year trial beginning in 2009.
Online Social Networking	Websites that allow users to create a personal space where interactions can occur with online friends – these may be teachers, peers or acquaintances.
Personal Learning Network (PLN)	A group of people with interests in a particular field who share thoughts and information to enhance and support each others’ understandings.
Social Capital	An inter-disciplinary research area, used as a framework in the Social Sciences research to develop understandings of temporal communities.
Temporal	At the present time.
Web 2.0 Technologies	Technological tools, either online or gadgets that enhance the collaborative nature of the online world, i.e. Blogs, wikis, MP3 players and websites.

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