

Immersion as learning: collaborating on the learning journey

By Camilla Elliott

At the conclusion of a recent international conference, the organisers circulated a survey to members enquiring about their motives for attending. Conducted by the International Society of Technology in Education (ISTE), this United States conference attracts between 16,000 and 19,000 delegates annually. In keeping with other conferences, an increasing proportion of presentations were streamed live or made available online soon after the event. While this increases the influence of the conference and creates opportunities for those unable to attend, organisers are noticing a change in the behaviour of delegates and are attempting to analyse this change. It is interesting to glimpse the democratisation of learning, the implications for traditional systems and exposure to opportunities for the learning community.

Changing values

The questions in the ISTE survey relating to the National Educational Computing Conference (NECC) could have come from any number of conference organisers worldwide. In summary, they asked: Did you attend the conference for the presentations, workshops, the trade show, keynotes or for the social interaction with fellow delegates? They have noticed the growing trend of delegates choosing to socialise in preference to attending conference sessions even when they travelled half way around the world to attend. The reason is summed up in responses to a **survey** conducted by educator **Sue Waters** as she attempted to establish that many other delegates shared her approach of bypassing workshops and presentations for the opportunity to physically meet with members of her digital Personal Learning Network (PLN). As she explains:

I don't have many opportunities to meet and network with others f2f. NECC may have been my one opportunity to ever meet a people who I network with online f2f as there is no guarantee I will ever get a chance to visit USA again. Creating stronger connections with people, by interacting f2f, in my view long term provides greater opportunity for learning than any session you can attend (Waters, 2009).

Rather than dismissing the value of conference activities, the opinion being articulated here and shared by respondents to the survey, is indicative of the changing nature of our professional learning. For some delegates the conference will be an opportunity to attend on a traditional basis while for others with established, digital learning networks, it is an opportunity to cement relationships and link a real person to a digital identity. It is an indication of the complexity of the changed environment of learning, the options available and the value of choice.

Setting up connections

While attending the same conference myself in 2008, I used the experience of my PLN to meet a teacher from Oregon, USA, and together we formed the ground work for a collaborative project between students from Oregon and Victoria, Australia. Leading educators **Julie Lindsay** and **Vicki Davis** are members of my PLN. They met at NECC some years previous and set up the renowned **Flat Classroom Project**. In their first project, students used interactive and communication web 2.0 tools to study, analyse, and draw conclusions relating to real-world scenarios based on '**The World is Flat**' by **Thomas L. Friedman**. The project has grown until it now includes new and intended projects such as **Digiteen, NetGen Remix and Eracism**.

Julie and Vicki lead a '**birds of a feather**' session as an opportunity for like minds to gather, share knowledge and form their own collaborative partnerships with expert guidance. The value of collaborative online projects as tools for learning has been proven through projects such as the **Flat Classrooms Project**.

This particular conference session would explore further options for creating global networks of students drawn together with a common learning goal.

Cementing PLN relationships

The power of an active PLN is illustrated in the ability of Diane and myself to arrive at a conference session with a bank of knowledge about conducting a collaborative project and being able to cement it into reality by adding a personal relationship to that knowledge. Although we had not met previously, being within a learning network that included Julie Lindsay and Vicki Davis gave us the confidence to embark on a project knowing that support would still be available after the event. The PLN style of professional learning is social, held within the moment, occurring here and now at the time of need. It varies from traditional professional development in that it is constant, always on. Research has proven the ineffectiveness of 'one shot' professional learning where knowledge gained and not applied within a short period of time is lost (Garet, 1999). The PLN model of social physical and online learning is the building of relationships to support constant knowledge growth as needed.

Meeting and deciding on a partnership with Diane was a hopeful beginning. While at the conference under the guidance of Julie Lindsay and with the advantage of face to face contact, we used our time together to plan an authentic project for collaboration. An analogy of caution that often accompanies the application of technology to the classroom is the danger of 'putting old wine into new wineskins'. It's a misconception to believe that adding technology to an existing project is all that is required to make it collaborative. Conscious of this warning, but working as novices in a collaborative online environment on opposite sides of the globe, we proceeded with a familiar project; however, we purposely built into it a sense of exploration for students.

Setting up the collaboration

The project was entitled **OzLinks** and commenced with an initial familiarisation period, after which time students were to plan a holiday together in an Asian or Middle Eastern country and present a journal or itinerary of their activities. Activities also included the use of personal **avatars**, development of an understanding of identity protection and a concluding sharing experience within **Voicethread**.

Partnerships were nominated and students used a group wiki to get to know each other and develop an understanding of each other's geographical environment. This was a familiar project within the Year 8 curriculum, but its transfer to a collaborative web environment where all involved were embarking on a new experience in learning transformed it into an exciting learning adventure over a period of 12 weeks.

From the outset it was apparent that this was to be an exercise in trust. Trust between myself and Diane Peters, also between myself and teacher, Denise Knight, whose Yr 7 Humanities class participated as the Australian class. We were on unfamiliar ground but realised the necessity of jumping in and beginning the journey. Teachers will understand this approach. In dealing with the use of Web 2.0 learning it is particularly important as, while there are a variety of tools, there are many obstacles. The learning is chaotic with neither student nor teacher being entirely the expert. It is exploratory learning as students, on the whole, possess a level of comfort with the Internet that encourages them to explore. It is also a democratic learning environment with less skills polarisation between expert and learner than in the traditional classroom. Everyone is a learner.

Motivation and enthusiasm

From the outset, a high level of student motivation and enthusiasm was evident. Australian teacher Denise noted an increased level of engagement with some students who found this an environment in which they could excel and, in fact, they became expert assistants within the class. An inspection of the history log files on the wiki also indicated that students accessed the site at times other than during the timetabled class. It

was clearly apparent that this project was providing a lever to student motivation in these critical middle years. One could say that it was an example of the type of learning articulated in the **Melbourne Declaration** (2009) which states that motivation “can be influenced by tailoring approaches to teaching, with learning activities and learning environments that specifically consider the needs of middle years students”. Students are highly engaged with web 2.0 and similar activities which involve the use of technology and cater for a variety of learning styles.

Knowledge of themselves and others is an important aspect of a student’s development. Organising students within a wiki facilitated a group working space with each group having a ‘personal’ page and a ‘project’ page. Immediately the personalities of students emerged and the majority set out to explore similarities and differences. In some instances, the personal page became a ‘chat’ forum, for example:

Hey Zoe – yah i think we should do indonesia and yes i do have a dog his name is gus he is cool i also have two kittens there sisters but one drowned in our pool but we have another one that is one month old and weighs 4 ounces she is mine and named her peanut.

hey Alex – Oh my Gosh!!!! your cat drowned in your pool!!!! that is so sad! i like the name peanut. i have a cat called Sparkle and a dog called roxy. do u have any siblings i have 2 older sisters.

Hey Zoe - Yes i have one brother and one sister my sister has had five open heart surgeries and is still alive. do you have surf board and do u surf.

to alex – i feel so sorry for your sister and i'm really glad she is still alive. i don't have a surf board and i have never tried to surf but i do ski in the river. one of the reasons why i have never surfed is because there is no ocean in Mildura (Ozlinks 2008).

For others it was an indicator of diversity as Austin stated: “[my] favorite tv show is bull riding. I dont do really any sports but i am going to take bull riding lessons, soon” (Ozlinks, 2008).

Authentic learning experiences

Throughout the course of the project students participated in collaborative teamwork, problem-solving, communicating, making connections, creating, and expressing themselves in a variety of ways. They learnt about time zones, seasons, customs and the differences in the structure of the school year. Numerous opportunities arose for instruction in the responsibilities of being a digital citizen and the need for identity protection. The implications of location in varying parts of the globe were highlighted in the students’ quest to meet at a set Asian or Middle Eastern location.

A skill relevant to all students was their reliability and responsibilities when working as the member of a team. The teamwork operated on a number of levels. Not only were the students collaborating with their online partner, within the classroom students collaborated spontaneously to support and learn from each other. There was a blurring of traditional teacher/student roles as in many respects we were all learners.

Future learning goals

Participating in this initial collaborative online learning through the Ozlinks project has provided us with the experience to heed the advice of educational leader **Greg Whitby** when considering future collaborations. He is adamant that a new pedagogy must emerge if students are to leave school with the necessary skills to function in their future lives, insisting that education must have a socialising focus that will “enhance the learners’ communal and global consciousness and foster responsible citizenship” (Whitby, 2007). A small sample of the numerous social consciousness raising projects appearing on the Internet that meet this criteria are: **United Nations, Tunza Youth Advisory Council, Australian Youth Ambassadors for development, Oxfam international youth partnerships, United to end child labour, Caritas Global Issues, EnViSci Network** and **Global Education Projects**.

While the Ozlinks project differed from those noted here in that it did not have an established framework, the experience of collaborating globally taught us the importance of defining processes to ensure success. To this end, some basic recommended guidelines for a teacher embarking on a collaborative online projects are:

- Establish a relationship with the collaborative partner prior to commencement;
 - Plan an authentic learning activity with specific outcomes;
 - Set up students partnerships as pairs or small groups;
 - Undertake activities to build student relationships and perspectives;
 - Create a presentation framework e.g. wiki, that provides flexibility for students;
 - Be prepared to explore and abandon Web 2.0 tools if necessary;
 - Be aware for opportunities to highlight everyday cultural differences;
 - Use the student skills base to build cooperation and share teaching;
 - Be alert for opportunities for digital citizenship skills building;
 - Use school login details; no surnames or personal details;
 - Establish common passwords and search tags;
 - Use official school email only;
 - Use regular whole class discussion to review progress and share new knowledge;
 - Share multimedia resources were possible;
 - Encourage flexibility.
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Successful learning

Focusing on student engagement and converting this into learning can have a significant impact on student outcomes. Evaluation of the Australian students on completion of the project indicated that they valued the experience of communicating with the American students; they enjoyed the opportunity to learn about another culture and working with the web 2.0 learning platforms. In end of year appraisals, Diane Peter's class of American students overwhelmingly reported this project as the highlight of their learning during the school year.

While access to technology was vital to this project, the most important ingredient was the 'will to succeed'. This type of learning can be chaotic and teachers must be encouraged to see beyond the associated disruption. Flexibility is essential. Leading educational consultant **Gary Stager** (2009) recently stated that the two key traits for teaching and learning in a digital world are collaborative problem-solving and the creative utilisation of existing technology. I agree.

Impact on the school library service

The revolution in learning involving collaborative projects and similar online interactive, participatory experiences has a significant impact on the vision of a school library service of the future. The curriculum is changing with the realisation that Internet access has made it less important for students to know, memorise or recall information. Cultural anthropologist **Michael Wesch** (2009) explains that easy access to information means students "need to move from being simply knowledgeable to being knowledge-able". [Furthermore] "if we work with students to find and address problems that are real and significant to them, they can then leverage the networked information environment in ways that will help them achieve the 'knowledge-ability' we hope for them" (Wesch, 2009). The role of the library has changed from that of knowledge gate-keeper to enabler. Well-trained library staff can play an integral role in supporting classroom teachers to ensure that students benefit from this transition.

To succeed, students rely upon the wisdom and guidance of the professionals in their local learning network. As our collaborative project revealed, every individual in the classroom is a learner in this Knowledge Era. Chris Lehmann (2009) of the **Science Leadership Academy in Philadelphia** emphasises that in many respects teachers today are more important than ever, but their role has changed. Overwhelming teachers and the library staff who support them must be:

- Innovative with a willingness to change;
- Inquisitive with a respect for new learning;
- Wise enough to assist students to make sense of their ever-changing world.

To conclude, New Zealander **Professor John Hattie** (2007) speaks of the importance of relevance in relation to student learning and assessment. To successfully achieve a learning goal, he insists that a student must be able to ask the following questions: 'Where am I going? How am I going? Where am I going next?', adding that the definition of a clear learning pathway is essential for learning to occur. Interacting in a global learning environment with digital technologies proved to be exceptionally relevant to our Year 8 students. It was an active learning environment and, from inception, was enabled and sustained through the resources of our Personal Learning Networks. The goal was clear and success in achieving it has opened up new learning horizons. Be it physical or virtual conference attendance, or membership of a social learning group, opportunities for learning are diverse and clear goals in establishing a relevant Personal Learning Network are critical elements for success.

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