

# **The Knowledge Tree: an E-journal of Learning and Innovation**

***The Knowledge Tree – Going Communal***  
**Edition 11**

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## Media Release

Monday 28 August 2006

### The Knowledge Tree goes communal

The impact of blogging on online communities is the focus of Edition 11 of [\*The Knowledge Tree: an e-Journal of Learning Innovation\*](#).

Published by the national training system's e-learning strategy, the [Australian Flexible Learning Framework](#), Edition 11, which will be released on Tuesday 12 September, contains contributions from online facilitation specialists discussing the latest trends in blogging for community building and education and training.

The lead article 'Launching a New Paradigm for Online Community' is by respected American online community facilitator Nancy White, of [Full Circle and Associates](#), who asks readers to take an explorative journey into blogging communities.

The article looks at some of the emerging patterns of blog based communities and raises some questions for their strategic application.

Other contributions:

in 'Blogging at the Chalkface', Alison Gotts from Cape Tribulation in Far North Queensland, Australia, writes a personal account of using blogs in teacher professional development during three years of facilitating the Diploma of E-learning

in 'Moodling while Mobile', Leo Gaggl of Brightcookie Online Educational Solutions based in Adelaide, South Australia, discusses research at the interface of mobile learning and learning management systems

in 'Thinking Beyond Pen and Paper', Jenny Ashby from Epsom Primary School in Victoria, Australia, discusses innovative projects she is engaged in with teachers and school students using voice and mobile technologies

in a book review of the recent publication on *M-learning: A handbook for educators and trainers* by Kukulsa-Hulme and Traxler, 2005, Ian Robertson provides a summary and critique of the main themes in the text.

On Tuesday 26 September at 2pm Australian EST a live online 'conversation' with lead writer Nancy White will be held, allowing users to continue the exploration begun in her article.

Ms White will also be conducting a national speaking tour of Australia in October so the 'live' conversation is an early opportunity for people to listen to her perspectives and ideas.

To participate in the live online 'conversation' visit:

<https://sas.illuminate.com/m.jnlp?sid=995&miuid=6EF957A67F2E379BB999DCB648384907>

If you miss the live online 'conversation' a recording will be available at:  
<https://sas.illuminate.com/mr.inlp?suid=M.7359EDBF1E558A5CF3D7940AF8F4E0>

For more about the 'conversation' and how to participate visit:  
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/networks>

For more information on Edition 11 contact the editor Jo Murray on Tel: (03) 6253 6029 or email: [jomurray@southcom.com.au](mailto:jomurray@southcom.com.au)

For more information on Nancy White's speaking tour of Australia visit:  
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/networks>

To access contribution guidelines and previous editions of The Knowledge Tree visit:  
<http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree>

For more information about the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, its products, resources and support networks, visit: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au>

Ends \_\_\_\_\_  
For more information about this story contact the Framework National Communication Project, Hayley Beck or Sean Felsman, tel: (07) 3307 4700 or email: [flexenews@flexiblelearning.net.au](mailto:flexenews@flexiblelearning.net.au)

#### Notes to editors

The **Australian Flexible Learning Framework** (Framework) is a national strategy collaboratively funded by the Australian Government and all States and Territories at AUD\$15 million annually. The Framework provides the vocational and technical education (VTE) system with e-learning skills, professional development opportunities, products, resources and support networks to meet today's increasingly technology-driven learning environment.

*The Knowledge Tree: an e-Journal of Learning Innovation* is published by the national training system's e-learning strategy, the Australian Flexible Learning Framework, and enables the sharing of research and innovation in global e-learning practice.

## Edition 11 Editorial – Going Communal

This edition's main focus is looking at what it means to be in community on the Web, that is, examining what is community or communion, the structures being used to create Web communities, the types of communities that are emerging, the processes used to facilitate online communities, the relationships being formed within Web communities and the uses of Web communities in education.

Our lead writer, Nancy White of [Full Circle and Associates](#) in Seattle, United States of America, first came onto my radar in 2000, when I subscribed to attend an online session titled 'Animating Online Tutorials'. Imagining I was going to learn about using computer animations with learners, Nancy's session, conducted in asynchronous forum software, was (surprisingly to me) more about creating, facilitating and animating conversation. Using visual aids to those ends, within discussions forums, was just a small part of it.

Nancy has long been a leader in the field of online community facilitation and online community development, so it is with great anticipation that I recommend you engage with her in an exploration of 'Blogging and Community: launching a new paradigm for online community?'

A live session with Nancy at 2pm Tuesday 26 September AEST will provide the opportunity to continue the exploration through direct conversation. So please click to [join us](#).

Our second article on blogging by Alison Gotts from Cape Tribulation, Queensland, Australia, is a personal, 'down to earth' account of blogging as a teaching practice in an online classroom. 'Blogging at the Chalkface' is a practical, reflective analysis of using blogs with Diploma of E-learning participants over three years, including impacts, strategies and a checklist for action.

This edition also contains two interviews.

Jenny Ashby founder of the Bendigo Education Apple Users' Team (BEAUT) in 'Thinking Beyond Pen and Paper' considers the place of podcasting in primary schooling and the implications of such teaching strategies for teacher professional development.

Leo Gaggl in 'Moodling while mobile' outlines research his company Bright Cookie is conducting in the converging world of m-learning applications, games based interfaces and learning management systems.

Ian Robertson provides a review of the recent publication on *M-learning: A handbook for educators and trainers* by Kukulsa-Hulme and Traxler, 2005.

# Blogs and community: launching a new paradigm for online community?

## Abstract

Online community has been an important part of the Internet, mainly forming around email lists, bulletin boards and forums. In recent years, the ascendancy of blogs has introduced a new platform for communities. This article looks at some of the emerging patterns of blog based communities and raises some questions for their strategic application.

## Introduction

Until recently, the term 'online community' implied a community who interacted online within some bounded set of technologies. In the early years, bulletin board systems (BBSs) and forums (also known as discussion boards) joined email lists as tools that enabled a defined set of people to interact around some shared purpose, over time. These were usually clearly bounded communities. The boundaries were created by the tools themselves – usernames, passwords, registrations or joining of a list. The technological act of joining was the most visible indicator of being 'in' or 'out' of the community. Communities could be public or private and visible only to those who joined.

Many of us interested in the application of online community to learning and work, 'grew up' in this era of bounded communities. We often brought with us our assumptions that online conversation, a core to our learning and work, would naturally happen in forums or email. We happily played with wikis as shared writing or repository spaces. We adopted blogs as personal publishing platforms, but community always found its infrastructural roots in forums and email lists, tools that many of us felt defined online conversation.

Then blog adoption accelerated. People began to blog in specific niches, from gaming, to politics, to third grade classroom curriculum, to chocolate; ecosystems of people writing about things they cared about. They started finding each other, commenting on each others' blogs. RSS (Really Simple Syndication) and feedreaders began to offer new possibilities about how we discovered and read blog posts. Other Web 2.0 tools such as tagging and mashups created ways to aggregate and remix the individual offerings into a unique package, customised by each of us to our own preferences.

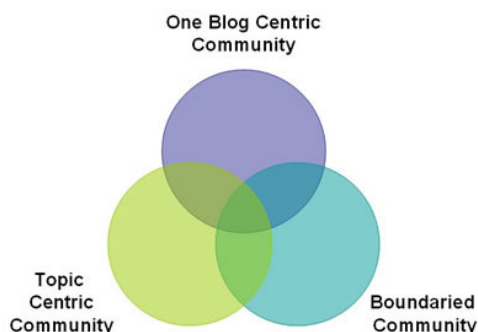
The game had changed. And with it changed some of our assumptions about what online community looks like, how individual and collective identity, power and control show up in these communities, and, at the core, the balance between the individual and the group. I have seen rifts between those who prefer one tool over the other. LeFever (2003 & 2004) discussed the [blurring of lines](#) between blogs and forum software and the [differences](#) between the two; [Levine](#) (2005) talked about the importance of discoverability and how this often happens better outside of forums; [Warlick](#) (2005) cited four reasons blogs may be better collaborative environments; Owyang (2005) wrote on [which tool is better](#) for communities. These bloggers, and others, continue to wrestle with this question. In part, preference and familiarity play a role. But there are differences between the tools as we know them today. In addition, our imagination in applying those tools leads to new options every day. These are all signs of evolution; innovation, clinging to the familiar, rejection and adoption.

Why should we care about how blogs and related tools might engender and support community? How can we strategically use what we know to best deploy blogs in this way? That's the path of exploration for this article. I'm not fully there yet, so I invite you to think with me about developing a strategic lens for looking at blog based communities. We'll start by looking at three forms of blog based communities, then examine the implications

and finally suggest how these provide a strategic lens for thinking about online communities.

## What blog based communities look like today

As blogging has gained wider adoption, blog based community shows up in three main patterns with a wide variety of hybrid forms emerging between the three. The Single Blog/Blogger Centric Community, the Central Connecting Topic Community and the Boundaried Community.



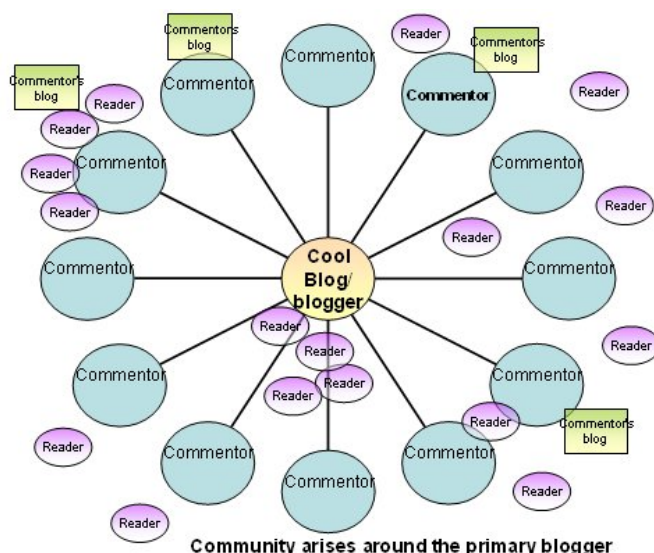
**Figure 1:**  
**Blog Based Communities**

By looking at the patterns we can start thinking about strategic approaches to blogs as a medium for community development. We can look at them in terms of their: technology/design - the impact of how the blogging tools are deployed and their impact on the community social architecture - locus of control and power, identity and interaction processes

the role of content or subject matter and other issues such as scalability and lifecycle.

### Single Blog/Blogger Centric Community

The first and most visible model is the hub and spoke model of 'one blog/blogger'.



**Figure 2:**  
**Single Blog/Blogger Centric Community**

This is the first form of blog based community to emerge as readers begin returning to early bloggers' sites, commenting and getting to know not only the blogger, but the community of commentors. The one blog is owned by one owner or organisation. There may be more than one blogger writing in a blog, but this is not an aggregation of blogs. It is best exemplified by well known or 'A List' bloggers, but has expanded to key bloggers in particular fields such as Stephen Downes or The Knowledge Tree, in e-learning,



[Stephen Downes](#)



[The Knowledge Tree](#)

or blogs run by an organisation such as [Interplast](#) or [Anecdote](#). Some of these have multiple authors, but they are all in one blog.

Technologically, these communities rest on one blogging platform and a single blog. The features of that platform and blog represent the range of features available to the community. There is little opportunity for members to change, add to or adapt the environment. More blogging tools make it easy to have multiuser blogs such as [WordPress](#), [Blogger](#) and [Typepad](#).

The central identities of these communities are the blog owners. Their identities are the best known in the community. The commentors' identities might emerge over time, but more likely, as commentors get to know each other, they share their personal details via private email, instant messaging and other forms of 'backchannel'. David Wilcox of [Designing for Civil Society](#) notes that '...blogs are personally defined spaces', (D.Wilcox, 2006, pers. comm., 26 August) which suggests that blogs allow us to get to know people better, providing a substrate for relationship and trust. This is quite different to a traditional online community where purpose brings people together and relationship and identity unfold over time, within the context of that purpose and not through a focus on an individual.

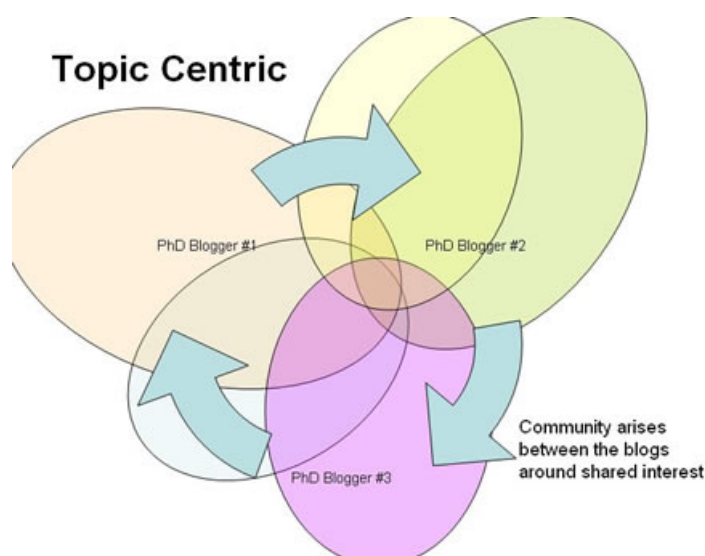
The power in this community is firmly in the central blogger's control. If he/she were to take down his/her blog, the community would most likely shatter unless the members had formed alternate communication paths to each other. The blog owner can set the rules and norms of engagement. There is no expectation of democracy, although when bloggers close or remove comments, cries of 'censorship' still ring out. But there is no obligation on the blogger to either provide the option for comments, nor to allow all comments. That said, when comments are restricted or not allowed, there can be no visible manifestation of community on the site.

From a subject matter perspective, single blog centric communities are almost broadcast-like, with the central blogger setting the conversational topic. Commentors can respond, or go away, but unless they develop an influential relationship with the central blogger, they can't control the topic.

What is interesting is how the community grows and develops over time. The volume of comments on a blog post may become overwhelming. It is unclear how far out these sites can scale from a community perspective, and they may become less community-like over time. Key commentators attracting their own set of readers in comments may be moved to create their own blogs. Or they may attract members to their existing blogs. Other commentators may add these other blogs to their daily reading, or shift entirely to the new blog. Links between the spin off blogs may show up in blogrolls, keeping a loose tie to the original blog, and forming a Central Connecting Topic Community, the second form.

### Central Connecting Topic Community

Instead of a hub and spoke, the Central Connecting Topic Centric blog community is a network formation. This form is a community that arises between blogs linked by a common passion or topic. The boundary of the network is a combination of subject matter (domain) and membership (community). Beyond the visible membership of linked blogs is the wider and mostly invisible network of readers.



**Figure 3: Topic Centric Community**

This form is exemplified by groups such as food bloggers, mummy bloggers, travel bloggers and political bloggers with a particular party or issue identification. They are often second wave adopters who would be hard pressed to attract the large numbers of readers as the early 'A list' bloggers did. They may be far less interested in positioning themselves, as they are in the topic they blog about. As these grow, they are more network like than community like. Communities form within the network as people find more specific niches and interests.

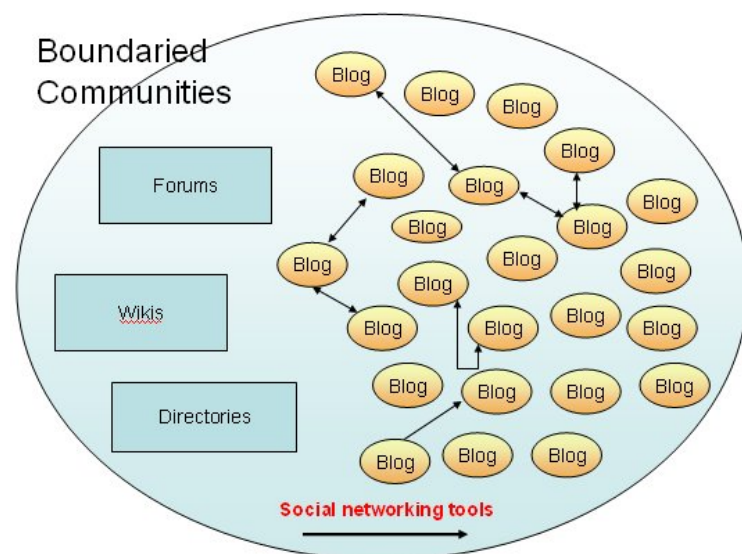
In topic centric communities both power and identity is distributed across the community. The existence of the community does not rise or fall on one blog. It can scale out and form subcommunities easily. Identity is manifest through the relevance, quality or amount of enjoyment a post provides to others. Personal details are not always disclosed on the blogs, but may be shared via private email and instant messaging. The rich network of perspectives allows the readers many views on an issue, rather than one that you might see in a blog centric community.

There has been some interesting work trying to describe how the articulation of norms helps define a blog based community made up of separate blogs ([Wei 2005](#)). [Suarez \(2006\)](#) tried to formalise a network of people who blogged about knowledge management by establishing a mailing list and a wiki to support the intersection of the community members.



## Boundaried Communities

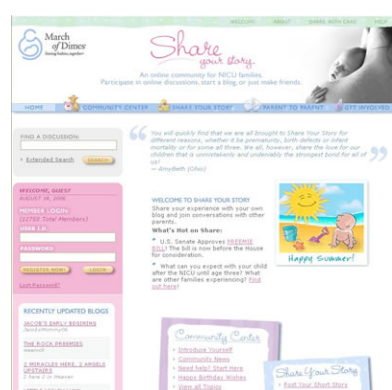
Boundaried communities are collections of blogs and blog readers hosted on a single site or platform.



**Figure 4: Boundaried Communities**

Typically members register and 'join' the community and are offered the chance to create a blog. This boundary makes them the closest form to traditional forum based communities. Examples include the huge teen oriented site, MySpace.com, Yahoo 360, March of Dimes, Share Your Story, and Farmer's (2006) Australian free educational blogging sites [Edublogs](#), [ESLblogs](#), [Uniblogs](#) and [Learnerblogs](#).

Often these communities have other tools such as discussion boards, social networking features, wikis and instant messaging built in. The blogs are part of the overall ecosystem. There is less emphasis on RSS and cross linking because those features are built into the technology in other ways. Because they are within a defined boundary, bloggers can see and easily access other blogs. They can, if they wish, link but mostly within this closed system and they seem to link less often outside of the community. This leads to denser and faster possible internal connections, possibly community building.



reflections, whereas the discussions are the centre of information exchange and daily 'chit chat'.

Power in boundaried communities is held in part by the 'owner' of the platform who can impose rules on the community, but power is exercised by bloggers in three typical ways. The first is frequency of posting. The blogger can decide when to post. In some communities, frequent posting puts a person's blog higher in the list of blogs, which may

[Share Your Story](#), a site for parents with babies in neonatal intensive care units (NICUs) started out as a discussion board based community and added blogs in July of 2005. Contrary to some worries about adoption of blogging, and blogging tools by what could be seen as a technological 'second wave' adopter group, blogs were rapidly adopted as a way of offering one's personal voice within the overall community. Blogs did not replace the forums. They offered a new community activity. The blogger has more control of the message than in a discussion board. They control the pacing by their own frequency of posting. The blogs are their more personal part of the site with pictures and

promote frequent blogging. The second is popularity or interest as measured by how many comments a blogger gets. As a blogger gets to be known in a community, more people comment. That blogger gains stature. Finally, the third is when there are social networking tools associated with the blog that help visualise relationship. These are often tools which allow you to add people as 'friends' or have them in your 'neighbourhood'. This then makes their blog posts more visible on your blog and convey a sense of 'who likes or is associated with whom'. A classic example of this is [MySpace](#) where users can define who can see what on their spaces, indicate who is a friend and in general show or not show one's social network within the overall MySpace ecosystem.

Often there is more emphasis on the social connections and social networking, as evidenced by attention on who is commenting on whose blog. Where there are social networking tools built in, the ease of adding someone to your network, as displayed in your blog, leads to easy formation of groups within the larger environment, suggesting that many of these sites are networks containing communities.

Some of these sites have a central content or domain direction and people are given particular expectations about what they should blog about, frequency, etc. such as [Blogswana](#). Others, like [Edublogs](#), offer a specific set of terms of use, identify what is not allowed, and the rest is up to the participants. Content can be focused or all over the place.

### Hybrids and Emerging Forms

The three forms noted above are really only the start. People are creative, and they will adapt and invent new uses. Blog mentoring communities are an example, where part of the manifestation of the community shows up in the blog, but other offline activity is a central manifestation of the community. 'Live blogging' communities tie face to face with the online for a time 'delimited' community, a community that manifests only for a short period of time associated with the live event.

New tools which allow a person to 'carry' their identity across a variety of online platforms and create their own personal networks suggest that our static ideas of blogs, wikis and forums will be outdated by the idea of a personal network and information cloud, that we shape and which is shaped by those we include in our network. This suggests we are redefining community.

### So, what do we mean by community?

In my home town of Seattle there is a neighbourhood called Fremont. It has traditionally been the home of artists, liberal thinkers and a great deal of creativity. Close to the neighbourhood centre there was a desolate area underneath a major bridge that attracted nothing but problems. Instead of complaining about the limitations of this spot, the creative people in Fremont transformed it by making a giant cement Troll under the bridge.



It did not matter that this was not prime real estate. It was in the community, so they made the most of it. The Troll is for me a visible symbol of the heart, art and sensibility of the community. They took a bare patch of land and made it magical. That's community. Online we also stake a patch of territory and make it ours. Regardless of what it looks like. So my caution to all of us is to never ever mistake the platform for the community. It is what people do with each other using the tools that matters.

Many have written about the definitions of online community (White 2005). The key indicator for us is that community is present when individual and collective identity begins to be expressed; when we care about who said what, not just the what; when relationship is part of the dynamic and links are no longer the only currency of exchange (Packwood 2005).

So how might these things show up in blog based community? How would they vary across the three forms?

- Shared readership?
- Shared authorship?
- Shared competency or domain knowledge?
- Individual and/or shared identity?
- Relationship between the core and periphery?
- How boundaries show up?
- How power is manifest?
- How learning is reflected from the individual (blogs) back to the community?

It is interesting using these questions because blog communities show up slightly differently than forum based communities. Boundaries show up differently and more permeably. Identity and power varies considerably depending on the blog community structure. What is similar is the flow of learning back to the community. People who blog share what they know. Others add in their contributions via comments. This echoes similar positive behaviours seen in successful forum based communities. So there is something about the underlying community ethic that bridges blog and forum based communities in most of the types of communities I've worked with or observed. These have almost exclusively been very topic or purpose driven, and rarely commercial. So I can't generalise out to commercial sites.

### **...or do we mean network?**

Because most blog communities are not bounded by a technological wall and have very permeable boundaries, they can grow far beyond the ability of a single individual to keep track of his or her network. They can change within days if a key blog becomes highly referenced in the blogosphere, totally changing the community dynamics. So are these communities, or are they a collection of nodes in a network, where some are more tightly related into communities? And if so, how might this be a design benefit?

Ramalingam (2005) has suggested that there are six functions that are played by a network. If we look at these six functions, we have another frame to analyse blog communities. They are:

- filters
- amplifiers
- convenors
- facilitators
- investors and
- community builders.

For example, people who tag their articles help others filter for specific content. People who point to key posts and resources amplify the work of others. Those who create a conducive environment for commenting, who organise blog events such as [Blog Carnivals](#) and web/[blog rings](#) are convenors. (A blog carnival is an organised effort to collect blog posts around a certain topic and post them on a host blog. Bloggers share the duty of organising these, usually picking one day a week or month to aggregate the posts.) The facilitator role is a bit less obvious until people get angry and usually someone will step in to mediate. This is different from many forum and list based communities where the

facilitator or moderator is a key role and identity. Investors are the providers of blogging software and hosting services, people who write bits of code that allow increased functionality, particularly tools that make it easier to track comment-based conversations ([Convo](#), [Co-Comment](#)) and other goodies. Finally, in a sense, anyone who points to another blogger with a link, who invites comments, who responds to comments, is a potential community builder.

I've found this a useful way to assess what is going on in any community or network. It is useful to identify missing roles or nudge some energy from one role to another as a community building activity and could be a strategy for supporting blog based communities.

Ramalingham's (2005) six functions echo some of the work Cross and Parker (2004) who describe types within a social network, i.e. Central Connectors, Unsung Heroes, Bottlenecks, Boundary Spanners and Peripheral People.

'Central Connectors' are people with dense sets of connections. We could think about the blogger in a single blog community as a central connector. 'Unsung Heroes' are people who '...engage selflessly in various aspects of their work and support the groups in ways that often go unrecognized' (Cross & Parker 2004:71). In any of the three forms of blog based community, this might be the person who uses back channel email to point out a blog post, stimulate productive conversations in comments or take the time to read carefully and respond thoughtfully to a post.

'The Bottleneck' is the person who has '...become so central to a network that they end up holding the group back' (Cross & Parker 2004:73). This could again be the blogger in a blog centric community who doesn't respond to comments, takes unexpected breaks from blogging, or who shuts down comments without warning. This may be from intent or just the circumstance of growing so popular. In Boundaried Communities, this may be the community host who can't get around to solving a technical problem, or who starts moderating and removing posts without clarity or adherence to the community rules. 'Boundary Spanners' are those who find the connections between people and ideas.

Again, this role can be seen in all three forms, but particularly in a blogger in any form who is generous in finding related blogs and linking to them, sometimes called 'linky love'. 'Information Brokers' are the people who notice and activate indirect connections. It is less clear to me how these show up in blog networks, since hyperlinks afford fairly direct connections.

Finally, there are the 'Peripheral People'. These make up a very important and often overlooked component of all three of these communities. We might rename them 'readers'. These are people who read, but don't blog themselves. They rarely if at all comment. But they represent a powerful part of any community. In forum based communities, we used to call these people lurkers. In the world of blogs, they have gained a new legitimacy because readers are expected with blogs. There is no way we could provide enough attention to comments if every reader commented. Yet the posts created in a blog community touch readers. They stimulate them to action. They provide catalysts for learning. Not every person has to interact, by commenting, to gain value. However, that value may show up differently for different bloggers.

Bloggers who are concerned with popularity and the number of hits they get will blog to attract readers. They will write in styles and with content that captures attention which may or may not nurture relationship. Bloggers who are concerned about community may create posts that have more 'insider language' which may be less attractive to casual readers

from the outside. This may be a pattern to explore in topic and community centric communities.

## A lens for using blogs for community

With the perspective of technology/design, social architecture (including roles and forms of interaction), the role of content or subject matter, and other issues such as scalability and lifecycle, how can we use this view of blog community forms as a strategic lens for designing and nurturing communities?

First, it is helpful to get a glance about where the forms are similar or different. By looking across them at the technological and social architectures and how they accommodate topic or domain, we can see a few patterns. (I encourage you to add to this in the comments - 'cos I can't figure this out alone!)

### Technological Architecture

Single Blog Centric	Topic Centric	Boundaried
Technology platform		
Uses a single tool	Blogs can be on a variety of tools, each controlled & customised individually	Platform centrally hosted and controlled
Tool controlled by blog owner	No centralized tool conventions	Members may have some level of customization options
Community members have little/no control on platform	May use webring link conventions as an ad hoc shared technology	Site administrator ultimately can control/delete blogs
	Network will not fall with the failure of one blog	
Technological Boundaries		
Clear central boundary around blogger	Few clear boundaries	Clear boundaries as defined by registration and log-in
Larger network unbounded	Webrings offer some sense of boundary	Varied use of RSS and tags
Connect to world and larger network with tags, RSS	Aggregators offer some sense of boundary	May allow non registrants to view, but rarely can they post or comment
	Connect to community, network with tags, RSS	
Scalability		
Comments may grow beyond an easy to read volume	Highly scalable, but intimacy and community closeness may diminish with size	Can scale if platform is robust
Comment spam may be a problem on more popular blogs, making commenting less desirable for members	Focus may blur and subdivide with growth	Can subdivide

The table titled Technological Architecture outlines the differences between single blog centric, topic related and boundaried communities in terms of technology platform, technological boundaries and scalability.

The main difference between the three forms from a technology perspective is that blog centric and bounded communities all sit on a single platform. So if unified technology is important to your community, these might be preferred modes, since a topic centric community has no central mechanism except personal agreement to have a unified platform. If you want to distribute control and not have a centralised architecture, the topic centric model offers flexibility and avoids reliance on a single platform in the case of technological failure. So control and simplicity are some of the tensions in the technology architecture variables.

Scalability appears to be most problematic in the single blogger centric community. Although the readership of such a community can scale out, the subset of people who can participate by commenting may have a limit, both for the blogger to read/control and for the reader to wade through.

### Social Architecture

Single Blog Centric	Topic Centric	Bounded
<b>Power</b>		
Blog owner holds most of the power	Power distributed across all the blogs	Some community leaders may have more influence
Commentors can disrupt if they choose to		Site owner wields ultimate power
<b>Identity</b>		
Blog owner primary identity	Each blogger has unique identity	Each blogger has unique identity
Frequent/valued commentors may build up identity	Some bloggers may have more prominence/popularity than others (community leaders)	Identity extended through participation in other areas/tools (forums, social networking, etc.)
<b>Interaction Modes</b>		
Blogger to reader	Blogger to reader	Blogger to reader
Commentors to blogger	Blogger to blogger	Blogger to blogger
Commentors to commentors	Commentors to blogger	Commentors to blogger
Linking to/from other blogs	Commentors to commentors	Commentors to commentors
Back channel	Linking to/from other blogs	Linking to/from other blogs
Call and response may dominate over dialog	Back channel	Using other site tools (IM, forums, wikis, social networking tools, etc.)
		Back channel

The table titled Social Architecture outlines the differences between single blog centric, topic related and bounded communities in terms of power, identity and interaction modes.

In the social architecture, we see the most significant set of differences around the issues of control/power and identity. This is a classic expression of the tension between the individual and the group that shows up in all social formations. From a design perspective, how might we intend the balance between individual and group to show up? If we want an individual focus, blogs give some of that in all forms, but has primacy in the blog centric formation.

Interestingly, all three offer a range of interaction options, although the power dynamics changes with the relationships in those dynamics. For example, while anyone potentially could comment in any three forms, the blog centric blogger could most easily prevent that interaction within the community. Power is key here. The topic centric community has the most distributed power. The bounded community power distribution ultimately depends on the choices of the site administrator. In the single blog centric power clearly sits at the centre, as does identity.

### Content Domain

Single Blog Centric	Topic Centric	Bounded
Findability		
Archives	Search across blog archives	Search within online space
Tagging		
Focus/Purpose		
Driven by blog owner	Blogs may contain domain related material AND other material.	
	Focus on domain strengthened with tagging and categories	

The table titled Content Domain outlines the differences between single blog centric, topic related and bounded communities in terms of findability and purpose focus.

Finally, in the content or domain area, power again raises its head. While topic theoretically can be quite focused or wide ranging, the control of the single blogger can trump the options. Topic centric is again the most flexible, but bounded communities can or may not be flexible, depending on the site rules. However, bounded communities offer the chance to be 'a little of both' when they set a general topic, but allow members to subdivide and even expand the topic focus.

With blogger centric communities, there is a question of what attracts community members, the blogger's personality, or the topic. Blog researcher Lilia Efimova (2006) suggests ...'[t]he communities formed around an author-centred blog are likely to depend more on the connections of blog-readers with the blogger personality than the topics she covers' (2006:para.10).

If you want the topic focus to be emergent and flexible, don't rely on a single blogger community unless that single blogger chooses to be open and emergent and responsive to the community participants. If you want a clear focus, like The Knowledge Tree, stick to the single blog form.

### Conclusion

If you click on the del.icio.us tag ['blog communities'](#) it quickly becomes clear that this is a topic that many are thinking about and working on. In doing research for this article, I asked my network for their sources via a blog post and in 24 hours I had more than I could ever hope to scan and still have a chance of finishing this article. It is a rich vein, with much to mine.

Some of the exciting areas of exploration are from a structural perspective, looking at blog community formation patterns through the exploration of links between blogs and comment patterns over time. Another area is the exploration of blog communities within particular domains, with some great work being done in the education and business

communities. How do these lenses work when we look across different genres (edublogging, workteam blogging, customer support blogging)? The non profit and non government sector is awakening to the possibility of blog communities for many aspects of its work.

Technological developments that allow us, as members, to see our blog communities such as [Blogmapping](#) and [Frappier](#) put the power in our hands. We don't have to wait for someone to do the research. Tools make us experts as well.

And finally, what are the other questions that emerge from this way of looking at blog based communities? What surprises await us as we observe and learn more? What happens when our options for community membership overwhelm us? When we fully see both the positive and destructive power of these communities? What happens when we move beyond text?

Community is alive and well in the blogosphere. It is emerging in a variety of patterns and manifesting in all sizes and types of communities. By beginning to explore their shape and interaction patterns, we can begin to think about how to intentionally nurture blog based communities for specific purposes. Much like the lessons for forum based communities which emerged in the late 1990s, we are now discovering what works, why, and what might happen next. It is still new. The patterns are not stable. But they suggest ways to think about the role of technology, power, identity and content in designing online communities.

Like the artist community in Fremont with their Troll, when a community sees a gap or an opportunity, they join together to fill it. So this exploration of the form and function of blog based communities is just beginning. We see a new tool, and we begin the creative process. The canvas is up, the paints are in front of us. The next step echoes Howard Rheingold's famous email tag line '...what it is ---& is up to us' (H. Rheingold, 1997, pers. comm., 28 April). As the godfather of online communities, (he coined the term 'virtual community'), Rheingold puts his finger on the pulse of possibility, yet again.

Let's continue this conversation in our live online 'gathering' on 25 (US) or 26 (AUS) September, as we hop across time zones to converse together.

### **Nancy's Web 2.0 Glossary - (For detailed version see Useful Links below)**

back channel - communication (email, instant message) sent personally to one or more individuals as opposed to a public conferencing forum. Back channel is rarely documented, but has a big impact in online interactions

blog roll – 'A list of recommended sites that appears in the sidebar of a blog. These sites are typically sites that are either on similar topics, sites that the blogger reads regularly, or sites that belong to the blogger's friends or colleagues. The term "blogroll" also evokes the concept of political logrolling (when legislators promise to vote for one another's pet bills) -- which is not unlike bloggers' habit of reciprocating links by posting links to blogs that link back to their own blogs.' – [Social Signal](#)

mashups - 'Website or [Web 2.0](#) application that uses content from more than one source to create a completely new service.' [Wikipedia](#)

RSS - (Really Simple Syndication) – At it's simplest, a mechanism to allow you to subscribe to updated web content such as blog posts and forum messages. 'The RSS formats provide web content or summaries of web content together with links to the full versions of the content, and other meta-data. This information is delivered as an XML file

called an RSS feed, web feed, RSS stream, or RSS channel. In addition to facilitating syndication, RSS allows a website's frequent readers to track updates on the site using an aggregator.' - [Wikipedia](#)

tagging - 'Tags are the keywords people add to articles in their blog or to web pages via social book marking tools like del.icio.us, Technorati, Yahoo ! My Web 2.0, etc.' - [Wikipedia](#)

## Useful Links

[Anecdote http://www.anecdote.com.au/index.php](http://www.anecdote.com.au/index.php)

Australian free educational blogging sites  
<http://www.edublogs.org/>, <http://www.eslblogs.org/>, <http://www.uniblogs.org/> and <http://www.learnerblogs.org/>

Blog Communities del.icio.us tag [http://del.icio.us/tag/blog\\_communities](http://del.icio.us/tag/blog_communities)

Blog Community Visualisation - samples include  
<http://anjo.blogs.com/metis/2005/01/blogtrace.html>  
[http://anjo.blogs.com/metis/2005/01/visual\\_settleme.html](http://anjo.blogs.com/metis/2005/01/visual_settleme.html)  
<http://infosthetics.com/archives/blog/?p=2>  
[http://infosthetics.com/archives/2005/12/weblog\\_conversation\\_visualization\\_diagram.html](http://infosthetics.com/archives/2005/12/weblog_conversation_visualization_diagram.html)

Blogmapping <http://www.blogmapping.com/>

Blogswana - <http://blogswana.wordpress.com/about/>

Designing for Civil Society: David Wilcox on technology, engagement, governance  
<http://partnerships.typepad.com/civic/>

Frapper <http://www.frappr.com/>

Nancy's Glossary - Full Circle and Associates -  
<http://www.fullcirc.com/weblog/2006/08/updates-my-online-interaction.htm>

Global Voices community <http://www.globalvoicesonline.org/>

Interplast - <http://www.interplast.org>

KM Bloggers Network  
<http://www.elsua.net/2006/04/28/welcome-to-the-kmbloggers-community/>

MultiUser Blogging Tools  
[Wordpress http://wordpress.com/](http://wordpress.com/), [Blogger http://www.blogger.com/](http://www.blogger.com/) and [Typepad http://www.typepad.com/](http://www.typepad.com/)

Share Your Story <http://www.shareyourstory.org/>

MySpace <http://www.myspace.com>

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# **Blogging at the Chalkface**

## **Abstract**

This article is a personal account which describes and reflects on the use of blogs (web diaries) within the Diploma of E-Learning, delivered by Tropical North Queensland Technical and Further Education (TAFE), in Queensland Australia. It considers the practicalities of using blogs with students who have limited technological experience, identifies the trends in student/blog interactions over three years and discusses possible strategies for encouraging students to use blogs. The impact of blogs on the students' own teaching practice is assessed and the work concludes with a checklist to help teachers decide whether to include blogs in their own teaching practice. The article draws heavily on personal comments made in facilitator and student blogs between 2003 and 2005.

## **Introduction**

The Diploma of E-learning is a fully online course which has had five intakes of students. The course was designed to provide accredited training for teachers faced with the task of developing online learning materials and facilitating e-learning with their own students. To ensure the success of the course, the following challenges were identified as crucial priorities, to:

- be responsive to student needs
- create a vibrant online learning community
- provide high quality learning resources
- relate the course directly to workplace needs
- structure the course in a holistic way.

Blogs were seen as a key strategy contributing to the vibrancy of the online community, in helping students to create a digital identity, and thus develop stronger linkages with people they would never otherwise meet. While this article focuses on blogs, this was only one of the strategies implemented within the course. A more detailed discussion of the other course strategies and how they were achieved is explained elsewhere (Gotts 2005).

## **What is a blog?**

Blog is short for 'weblog' – a personal journal written and published on the Web, which can be viewed by other people, who are usually able to comment on the journal entries. The entries are chronological, so that ideas are recorded over a period of time. People who write in their 'blogs' are called 'bloggers'. 'Blogging' has become a popular activity on the Web, as more people 'blog' their daily thoughts.

## **A theoretical framework**

The potential for using blogs in the Diploma started as a 'wouldn't it be nice' thought in 2002, that students could keep a diary about their thoughts as they developed, in relation to course concepts. Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) timely publication of a theoretical and structured framework for the blogging process helped formalise this idea. Bartlett-Bragg outlined five stages.

Stage 1 – Establishment: recall and record learning events and answer structured questions

Stage 2 – Introspection: start to write about emotions and evaluate experiences.

Stage 3 – Reflective Monologue: start to extract more meaning from the experience.

Stage 4 – Reflective Dialogue: developing a deeper reflective process, with a more considered writing style, starting to write for others.

Stage 5 – Knowledge Artifacts: providing guidance to readers, who may use the knowledge to enhance their own experience and learning, as knowledge artifacts.

This framework was found to be very useful at the beginning of the course, when it was explicitly presented to the students, as they were first introduced to blogging, and about to set up their blogs. The framework provided an overview and created an expectation of how their blogs would develop. As facilitator, I envisaged all the Diploma students moving from stage one to stage five over the life of the course (12 – 18 months), creating many knowledge artifacts which could then be incorporated into future courses as new learning materials.

## The practicalities

### Where will I blog?

If students are going to have a blog, the first decision is where will it be located? There are a number of free blogging sites on the Internet. The one that was finally chosen for this course was [www.xanga.com](http://www.xanga.com). This site was chosen for several reasons, the main one being that it was simple to set up, and easy for students to subscribe to each other's blogs, once they were members of the Xanga community. The ability to comment on each other's blogs was seen as an important building block in developing a sense of community. Xanga provided a digest of all new postings and comments, which was emailed to one's inbox. Receiving this update made it easy to respond with a comment – just one click between the email link and the relevant blog entry.

This entry from my blog shows how effective this digest was in keeping me updated:

Tuesday, September 13, 2005 – Bombarded by blogs

Never in my wildest dreams – logged on after two days away from the computer and there was my email subscription with no less than 8 blog entries made by students – and some great entries from the 'old guard' as they reflected on running their own chats and commented on the issues. I felt like I had 8 people in the lounge room talking to me. And really discovering how they were getting on (A. Gotts, 2005 pers. comm, 13 September).

It is possible to use other blogging sites and subscribe via RSS, but given the low level of computer literacy among my students, and the need to get them blogging early in the course, Xanga was the best option. There were four intakes into the Diploma over three years and they all blogged at Xanga, which meant that new students were able to subscribe to the 'old hands' blogs, and a lot of e-learning advice and wisdom was passed on. One new student posted to the blog of an 'old hand':

Phew! Thanks for your inspiring blog D-----. I'll have to come back and read the early days soon (Student A, 2006, pers. comm, 5 March).

As this Xanga blogging community grew to more than 45 members, it became counterproductive to shift it to another location. Some learning management systems now offer a blog or journal. However once students complete the course, they no longer have access and therefore it is my hunch that they are likely to cease to blog, or at least in that location. Encouraging them to set up a blog which stands outside the course boundaries means that the blog, and the blog learning community may outlive the course. If more information is required about RSS, Richardson (2005) provides a quick start guide for educators.

## Blogging expectations

Information was provided to students at the beginning of the Diploma to answer the question: Why do I have to keep a blog for this course?

‘Journal entries can provide tangible evidence of mental processes. They make thoughts visible and concrete, giving a way to interact with, elaborate on, and expand ideas. A good teacher is a reflective teacher, one who thinks about what she is doing, how it is working, and how it makes her feel.’ Adapted from Kerka, S. (1996) *Journal Writing and Adult Learning*, ERIC Digest No.174.

Think of the blog as a learning tool to help you make sense of your experiences in this course. By writing regularly you will develop new perspectives over time and create new ideas about what actions can be taken. You will need to set aside some time each week to think over the activities and write something. This will require a certain amount of self discipline. You are expected to make regular entries in your blog – at least once a week – and to comment on the entries made by other students. Your blog will be assessed to provide evidence for a range of competencies.

Here are some general questions to think and write about:  
What do you think and feel about your progress through the course?  
What did you learn today and how will you apply that learning in practice?  
Write about a person or reading that touched your thinking  
Write your draft ideas about topics here as your thoughts flow.

Who will read my blog?

Well initially, you are writing for yourself, and for other students in the course. I will cruise through from time to time. As you develop your own ‘voice’ or writing style, hopefully your blog will offer something to other students in the course who will find your reflections helpful in understanding their own learning. If you wish to keep something private, Xanga offers you the ability to make postings private (Diploma in E-learning, course materials, 2002).

## Strategies to encourage blogging

### Blog yourself

This strategy is fairly obvious – teachers who want their students to blog need to blog themselves, and by providing the students with your blogging URL, it provides them with a window into your thoughts, which they don’t normally get to see. But teachers often have a range of reasons why they don’t blog, mainly related to lack of time.

Stephen Downes (2001) has three rules or challenges for building a community.

The third rule is: you – the community manager – are a real person too. Possibly the most important real person in the community. If you expect to elicit reaction, to stimulate debate and discussion, to encourage the sharing of resources, then you will have to (to some extent) wear your heart on your sleeve. You have to have (and express) a point of view. It has to be your point of view (people have long since been trained to shrug off corporate or government news releases.) It doesn’t have to be controversial (the controversy will come of its own accord, trust me), it merely has to be honest. (Downes 2001:para.19)

This quote has provided a good guideline for my own blogging behaviour – be honest and open. Let the students see your point of view. They can only learn from it. Here is an example from my own blog, attempting to write in an open and honest way.

Saturday, March 5, 2005 – Communal Coffee Shop – What a brainstorm!  
I am probably not the first to do this but I felt the lightning strike as I realized that with two different groups in the Diploma at different stages, it would be good to have a space where they can all mingle. So the Coffee Shop forum is now going to be an open space for ALL Diploma students. Don't know how the new students will feel about this, but I guess in the real world you would be a bit apprehensive about walking into a crowded room where it seemed like everyone knew each other and they are all talking at the top of the voices, drinking coffee. And I can see a smoke haze as well – an outdated image (A Gotts, 2005, pers. comm., 5 March).

One student wrote in his first blog entry '...I am afraid to write my real thoughts' (Student B, 2004 pers.comm, 7 August.). Writing this down was an amazing way of sharing his feelings with the group – many of whom were equally terrified, and probably gave other students more confidence to write than anything the facilitator could say.

### **Comment on student blogs on a regular basis**

One first blog entry started with a poem.

Just starting out – timidly – shy  
Who'd want to read this – why? (L. Owbridge, 2004, pers. comm., 10 September).

If students know that their facilitator is interested in reading their blogs and commenting on their blogs, it provides motivational force for continuing to blog – the teacher reads what I write. Once they have been writing for some time, this is not so important, especially as other students start to comment. Nancy White, in a videoconference on blogs, observed: 'You tend to blog more if people give good comments to your posting' (N White, 2005, pers.comm., 7 July).

One student, knowing that I (the facilitator) read her blog regularly, started to write in an informal style, as if she was having a real-life conversation with me. At first this was mainly outlining problems, but as the course progressed, it became more reflective and moved into the later stages of Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) framework.

Communication like that email is important – it sort of rounds up the 'browns cows' and gets a group dynamic – and the role play is good – same result and people feel more confident when they hide behind a person – they seem to like doing mini-plays and participate vigorously – there you are Alison – that is my feedback as a student and it is my experience as a teacher – being a student in this course is making me a better teacher by reminding me of what motivates students to participate and what bonds them together as a group, apart from my computer skills which are way better and make me feel more confident with my little tech-heads and gives me new prestige in the staff room (Student D, 2005 pers. comm., 3 November.)

### **Do not make blogs prescriptive for assessment**

There was an expectation in the Diploma that students would blog and that what they wrote in their blogs would be used as evidence to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of e-learning. But there was flexibility in the course, as a few students hated blogging, and never actually wrote a blog. These students can accumulate the evidence

they require in other ways. White (2005) also raised the issue of blogs and assessment. One of the students posted the following thoughts to her blog.

One thing I did get out of the video-conference [with Nancy White] was that some teachers seemed to be pressured into using a blog as a way of assessing a student. This method seemed to be chosen either from a lack of understanding as to what a blog really is or maybe because someone said that if your course is worth anything, then you must blog. Maybe because I am still learning and developing my blog skills I don't see it as an effective assessment tool. It is a medium that I can express myself in, warts and all, but if I knew that I wouldn't pass my assessment tasks if I didn't blog, then I would certainly not enjoy it at all (J. Mair, 2005, pers. comm., 21 July).

Another student describes how he sees blogs were used in the Diploma.

Our blogs are used as a 'doodle pad' for developing our thoughts and assessment tasks for the assignments (R. Godwin, 2006, pers. comm., 7 February).

Blogging may suit students who have a more reflective learning style, as one Diploma student recognised in her blog.

I am hesitant to enter blogs into the arena of assessment, knowing that a lot of TAFE students are not reflective, are scared of writing their thoughts down, do not feel confident in any sort of writing, etc. etc. Just don't think it can be used in assessment (J. Mair, 2005, pers. comm., 9 July).

### **Encourage students to revisit earlier postings**

White also noted '...[i]t is a powerful experience to look back on what you wrote – to trace how you grew your ideas like the "family album"' (N. White, 2005, pers. comm., 7 July). Within the Xanga community, Diploma students have had a large number of 'family albums' to peruse and learn from, not just their own. In the early part of the course, chats and discussion topics were held which were based on the blogs of earlier students.

### **The reality**

Diploma of E-Learning students have blogged for three years, and it was an interesting experience to revisit all the blogs and see what trends and patterns could be identified. Between 2003 and 2006, there have been 4 intakes, and each intake was expected to blog. Students generally took 12 – 18 months to complete the Diploma and the blogs tell the story from the beginning. It's been possible to read their blogs and watch them change from beginners to confident e-learning facilitators. The blogs told the stories of the barriers they faced, and the hurdles they overcame, their successes and their achievements. So what were the main patterns?

- In each intake, there were one or two students who set up their blogs, then never made an entry.
- The early blogs in a student's career were more focused on personal feelings, family dramas and barriers to their projects. This relates to Bartlett-Bragg's (2003) Stage Two – introspection. It could be argued from that finding that some students may never leave Stage Two.
- Although leading questions were provided to get students blogging, most students ignored these questions after a few postings and wrote what they wanted to write.
- More than two thirds of the blogs documented students' progress on their project for the Diploma and wrote up their successes and achievements, as the project developed. Some students used the blog to discuss their problems, and seek a solution. Some students reflected on their role as a student in the Diploma and

then changed perspectives to view it through their teacher roles. These blog entries usually fit into Stage Three – Reflective Monologue or Stage Four – Reflective Dialogue. This is where the majority of blogs were located.

- Only a handful of students reached Stage Five and created knowledge artifacts.

## In hindsight

In preparation for this article, Diploma students were invited to reflect on blogs and how meaningful they were.

Oh dear poor old blog, not only lacking in colour, interesting fonts and images but devoid of cutting edge comments and original thought! I should have been a much more caring parent. I think my guilty vice is selfishness. I used you for purely personal reasons, to vent my spleen and crow about successes although I do treasure having such a record of my turbulent times as a total beginner in the vast and ever expanding world of e-learning (L Evans, 2006, pers. comm., 3 February).

As for blogs – this year I have my students using blogs because part of their assessment for a module called ‘Identifying Business Skills’ was to create a learning journal. The success of this has been far beyond my wildest dreams, it’s like students in the past have been hidden behind a door, and now I finally have the key to unlock their thoughts and feelings, and their background information which is sometimes so important, yet so hard for them to share face-to-face (D. Schupfer, 2006, pers. comm., 5 February).

I found that my blog changed dramatically over the year along with the circumstances of my life, which side of the bed I had gotten out on, my bio-rhythms, what I had for breakfast, etc.....soooooo tied into my emotions, but that was because I was using it as a sounding board and probably not the way Alison wanted us to use it. I don’t have another adult at home with me, so I guess that also has a bearing on how I used it. Had I had an adult to bounce things off first, I may have filtered out some stuff and then been a bit more erudite in my writing (D. Fitzpatrick, 2006 pers. comm., 3 February).

I haven’t thought about getting my students to use blogs. Why? Most don’t know how to turn on a computer. An interesting dilemma but of course we refer to it as a “challenge”! And, the only person I have suggested this to as a useful tool is the one and only – my MOTHER! Being the annoying genius type mother that she is, immediately signed up and subscribed to my blog – I then quickly had to subscribe to hers so that she didn’t think I was a total fraud! 8-))) (K. Gillham, 2006 pers. comm., 6 February).

I am sorry I didn’t put some jazz into the blog I did for the e-learning. One factor re reluctance to blog I would like to raise is that in this deluge of words coming out of the screen these days, the one great thing of ‘literary style’ has flown the coop. How many people can actually write? To write something that someone will actually want to read is a skill – not one that I have – so maybe here lies a question – those of us that grew up in the literary world where great store was set on great writing maybe now are dinosaurs. Now Stephen, that guy can write (B. Mitchell, 2006 pers. comm., 4 February).

Thinking about the purposes and audiences of my blog really crystallizes Anne Bartlett Bragg’s theory about blogs: the blogger progresses through stages. They first write for themselves and then others: a wider audience. I am starting to do that now as I have realised the importance of blogs in the world of e-learning. Stephen

Downes won an award for his blog last year and it is interesting to read the other award winning blogs. It makes you realise that you are part of something bigger than the Diploma of E-learning or TAFE or QLD or even Australia for that matter – a truly global movement (C. Bartlett, 2006 pers. comm., 5 February).

## A checklist

If this article inspires you to try using blogs with your students, here some things to consider.

- Set up your own blog and start blogging on a regular basis, writing openly and honestly.
- Subscribe to other educational blogs such as Stephen Downes, and make comments on his blog.
- Survey the range of blogging opportunities that are available to you to set up blogs for your students and select the best option for your circumstances.
- Explore RSS and see if this could work with your students.
- Develop the expectations you will have for your students' blogs.
- Think carefully before you make blogs part of the assessment.
- Look at the learning styles and characteristics of your learners – how many reflective learners do you have? How many are comfortable using the web?
- Develop a list of strategies to motivate students to blog.
- Write about all these steps in your blog.

## Useful links

A case study of the Diploma of E-Learning is available at 'Designing E-Learning' [http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/designing/learning\\_design/sequences/QLD/index.htm](http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/designing/learning_design/sequences/QLD/index.htm)

The author's blog for the Diploma of E-Learning – 'Facil\_sista' - can be read at <http://www.xanga.com/alisonq>. It is possible to visit some of the student blogs from the subscription list on the left hand column.

## Acknowledgements

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## Thinking beyond pen and paper: An interview with Jenny Ashby of the Bendigo Education Apple Users' Team (BEAUT).

Interviewer Jo Murray

**Jo:** Welcome to The Knowledge Tree Everyone. Today we're speaking with Jenny Ashby, a teacher from Epsom Primary School in Victoria, Australia. Now Jenny you seem to wear lots of hats, as most teachers do. You're a Grade 1 classroom Literacy teacher, but you also specialise across the primary school, as a Librarian, a Reading Recovery teacher, and an Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) coordinator for the Bendigo region. So welcome Jenny...

**Jenny:** Hi Everyone...

**Jo:** So Jenny, I understand you are also the founder of a group called BEAUT. Could you start by telling us how you got into the work you're doing with BEAUT in the first place please?

**Jenny:** BEAUT stands for Bendigo Education Apple Users' Team, and I guess this has evolved from one of my passions – and that is, using the Apple platform for education. So I decided to form a group (because there were quite a few of us), but we don't tend to get a lot of professional development aimed at Apple users, so I decided to form a group, and I put together the web page and I'm having two events every term (where people actually come face-to-face), and then making the website, deciding where the events would be. And lastly I've started producing podcasts for busy teachers to enable them to be able to listen to a lot of what might be going on at the events.

**Jo:** Thanks Jenny, so this organisation called BEAUT, can you tell me a bit about the goals of that organisation?

**Jenny:** Yes, we have four aims of the group. The first one is to develop a team of educators who are willing to share and learn new uses of ICT in education. The second one is to lead other-educators in the uses of the newest technologies. The third is to be innovative with the use of ICT. And the last one, which I think is most important is to embrace the current real-world uses of ICT in the community, and especially with our youth to engage them in education.

**Jo:** Okay, so I understand that you're involved in some research as well at present, Jenny, so can you tell us a bit about the project you're involved in?

**Jenny:** Yes, I'm also doing a case study for the Knowledge Bank (which is with the education department in Victoria), and our case study involves using podcasting in the classroom. And we are wanting to see what happens when we use podcasting in the classroom with children, whether the children become more engaged, and basically enjoy what they're doing more than with pen and paper. The project that's involved at my school is a 'living history' project – the children are interviewing past students, pupils, and teachers, and other people who've worked at the school over many years – and they are creating podcasts that will be on in our website, eventually – later in the year for our 125th anniversary.

**Jo:** How are you finding the children are responding Jenny?

**Jenny:** Well I recently emailed them to find out about their thoughts, and I thought if I emailed them they could individually send me their thoughts and not be worried about what other people thought. And out of all the responses I got, there was only one, that wasn't negative, but just said they didn't want to talk. But all the others were so positive about podcasting.

**Jo:** And what ages have you been working with?

**Jenny:** This project is working with Grade six children. The ages would be eleven and twelve year olds.

**Jo:** And what did they say they liked about podcasting?

**Jenny:** They like...um...recording their voices, and adding music to it. They like working with their friends. They like adding artwork, 'cos we do enhanced podcasts. And for other podcasts that they have created, they have also had to find Web links – so they have enjoyed doing all of those jobs.

**Jo:** So what implications do you think this has for the professional development of teachers who will be working with these age students in the future?

**Jenny:** I think they need to see podcasting as a way of children publishing their work – they're going to need to think past pen and paper.

**Jo:** So what sort of professional development does that mean will need to be provided to those teachers, do you think?

**Jenny:** Not only do they need to learn some new technical skills to use software that's available, but they also need to be thinking differently.... to be thinking well above the use of PowerPoint or something like that...using technology as they do.

**Jo:** Let's go back to the teacher professional development issue, because given that's one of your goals of BEAUT and trying to get teachers to use technologies the way our youth do, have you come up with any more effective ways of engaging teachers in that long term project, I guess, of getting comfortable with ICT? Have you found any other ways of engaging them other than the standard professional development strategies that are around?

**Jenny:** Well, last week I just attended a peer coaching course, and we're hoping to use this method of professional development to create a culture where teachers consciously choose to try and improve in their teaching, and use a peer coach to help them improve. This type of professional development will give them support when they come back from an intense ICT training program, whereas I think they come back now and they're just left by themselves. So the peer coach goes into the classroom and observes what the teacher wants us to observe, and then gives feedback – so they might be wanting to know if when they're using the computers for a certain activity - they might want us to observe are the students becoming engaged? Or are the students off task? When the task was presented to the students, was it presented in a logical format? They might even just want us to observe how they respond to children's answers to questions, and in actual fact the teacher decides what they want us to observe – teacher driven professional development.

**Jo:** And that's obviously going to be broad enough to be applied to any requirement for professional development, isn't it, upon teachers – it needn't be only for ICT, but you're hoping to use it in that field as a trial, are you, and will you be evaluating that with teachers to see, you know, whether that peer coaching model works?

**Jenny:** For the rest of this year, I have to peer coach teachers at my school, write some anecdotal notes, and keep a journal of how the peer coaching is going. The teachers may choose the area, and it might not be connected to ICT. But we're hoping we can start and then move in that area. Well we're focusing in the areas that the teachers want us to look at, but we are allowed to make options for them in the future. So I hope we'll be able to steer them towards using ICT in various ways in the classroom, but with them choosing it as an option – not being told "This is what you should do".

**Jo:** So do you think directives are part of the reason why there's a difficulty with teachers coming to grips with ICT – because it's a directive rather than a, "Would you like to do this"?

**Jenny:** Yeah I think that can be some of the problem, in that it's not given as a choice. And I mean, it should all be an option, sometimes when pen and paper is quicker.

**Jo:** Oh definitely, that's always – well I've always thought it was, you know, technology needs to be used when it's the best option.

**Jenny:** I had a really good example today of the use of ICT with a boy in Grade three.

**Jo:** Right.

**Jenny:** He's a reluctant writer and yesterday I gave him an email address – I actually sent him an email before I went home from school, and by 8:30 I had emails from him. Today he was up at half past six sending me an email.

**Jo:** Yeah I think that's been the experience of lots of online teachers, where students are just given that option of being able to communicate in a different way, and at their time and place – when they want to do it, and it does engage them and they do enjoy that flexibility of being able to write rather than talk or being able to email when, you know, after hours when it suits them. So, yeah, it's great to see that happening, isn't it?

**Jenny:** Yes, I have to tell myself sometimes – and remind myself that we have to think differently. We are so used to thinking pencil and paper...it has to be printed – so today after I had the class type up their opinions of why they voted for the Book of the Year, and print it out, as we do, I realised we should have made this as a podcast! So we quickly got the microphones and they recorded their opinions about why they voted for their special book – The Children's Book Council Book of the Year.

**Jo:** Yeah it's a really simple example, but it's a very effective one Jenny, thanks very much. How do we find out more about your work – some of the podcasts that you've been doing both in professional development and of your students?

**Jenny:** I have my own BEAUT website, and the podcasts are available on there. So you can subscribe from the BEAUT site or you can go to the iTunes music store and look in podcasts and search for BEAUT. And our Living History projects are not on the Internet yet, and so you go to the Epsom website there'll be a link in October. Talking about thinking differently, we were going to have a guest book where people could write in comments at the 125th anniversary, but I realised there are a lot of people who won't be here – who are around the world, so it would make great use of a blogging page on the website. So yes we've got a blogging page attached to the 'Living History' site where people all around the world that came to Epsom Primary can put their memories about the school.

**Jo:** Okay, well we'll look forward to checking that out Jenny in October. Thank you very much for that fascinating conversation about how we can – well how we need to change our thinking about working with young people, and thanks very much for speaking with The Knowledge Tree.

**Jenny:** Thank you for listening to me, and one thing – the children aren't afraid of using technology... they take to it like ducks to water.

## Useful Links

BEAUT <http://www.beaut.org.au/index.html>

Epsom Primary School Podcasts <http://www.epsomps.vic.edu.au/podcasting/index1.html>

BEAUT Podcasts

<http://www.beaut.org.au/podcasts/Beaut/beautpodcasts/beautpodcasts.html>

The Knowledge Bank

[http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/knowledgebank/infocus/aug2006\\_kbonline.asp](http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/knowledgebank/infocus/aug2006_kbonline.asp)

## Moodling while Mobile: an interview with Leo Gaggl

Interviewer: Jo Murray

**Jo:** Welcome to the Knowledge Tree Everyone. Today we are speaking with Leo Gaggl, Director of Bright Cookie Online Education Solutions based in South Australia. Bright Cookie provides professional Moodle hosting services to numerous government and private organisations around Australia with dedicated Moodle servers based in Melbourne. So, welcome Leo.

Tell us a bit about Bright Cookie and how you got into hosting open source Learning Management Systems (LMS) in the first place?

**Leo:** Right, it was a long process –I mean I have been working with education in one sense or another ever since I started in IT in Australia. More initially on web-based applications but it was really a combination with Richard. Richard was lecturing at TAFE and starting to look into Learning Management Systems (LMS) and was working with WebCT at that stage. So I had some exposure to WebCT from some other projects and then we ah...if you ask me now, who and how we found Moodle I actually couldn't tell you off the top of my head. We were looking at it for a specific project and it did its job extremely well and we have...since then, we have never looked back really in that sense.

**Jo:** Sounds pretty lucky, so that's Richard Wallace that you are talking about isn't it?

**Leo:** Yes, yes.

**Jo:** OK, so you are doing some research at the moment I understand? Can you tell us a bit about that?

**Leo:** Research yes, it terms of integrating Flash more tightly with Moodle. Flash games in particular... into Moodle including assessment and tracking and all the other Moodle facilities, but using Flash as the interface, which was actually developed by a US company– yeah a more games-based interface –a richer interface that you can actually do currently with Moodle, so that's one of the research projects we are doing. The other two are more in the mobile handset for m-learning basically.

**Jo:** So, before we get on to that, Leo what implications does this Flash interface or gaming interface have for open source and broader learning management system usage over and above Moodle?

**Leo:** The e-gaming or Flash games in education are a bit of a rage at the moment, Richard has recently attended a conference in that regard. We're working with a couple of partner companies, but none of the companies that we are aware of have actually successfully integrated it with a learning management system. So, while you have got a nice interface –a 'Flashy' games-based interface, you can't use any of the assessment functionalities or tracking functionalities that you normally would get within an LMS. So, the reason why we are choosing Moodle initially –and Moodle is not going to be the only one we are going to integrate these games into...but for us ...because it's open source...it makes things a lot easier in terms of the integration process and obviously we have in terms of hosting and terms of existing installation a user base there that we want to serve first. So that's the reason for integrating it very tightly into Moodle. We also will have a SCORM-based interface for other learning management systems that do support the SCORM standard –but that is going to be the second stage. Just to give you an idea of the

timeline, I'm planning to have the first game ready to be shown by the end of September – I'm actually flying over to Europe to a conference at that stage, so I actually want to have one all ready to show there.

**Jo:** So, how can we find out more about your research?

**Leo:** We will be definitely communicating that from our web site. Probably, we are anticipating a release of the games generator, with the integration obviously, towards the end of this year towards the end of December.

**Jo:** Oh great! We'll make sure the link through to your website is on The Knowledge Tree so that people can follow that up.

**Leo:** The games that we have in there at the moment are already in existence and have been used extensively in the US –some of them here. But as I said the integration into a LMS hasn't been done. An extension to that –and that leads us probably to the mobile side of things again, will be a mobile version of those games. Obviously that can't be, for user interface reasons, as tightly integrated into the Moodle interface as the others, but it will give students the ability to take a learning object or a game as such, onto their mobile phone or PDA. I probably tend to go more towards a mobile phone –I'm not a particular friend of PDAs in education because these things are just too expensive. I mean I'm a PDA user myself, but I realise that it's not exactly a device that the average student will be able to afford or usually use.

**Jo:** But they would have a mobile phone you reckon?

**Leo:** That's correct. Yes and a lot of the mobile phones these days, not just the smart phones, are able to support Flash – in one sense or another.

**Jo:** Right. OK. So getting onto the Mobile Learning Project that you're also involved in working on. Tell us exactly what that's about.

**Leo:** It's actually two. One is a mobile version of those games which means that you can load Flash (basically) a movie onto a mobile phone. One test version that we've got at the moment is for Sydney Olympic Park where they are going to test that for students. They go out to monitor pond temperatures, what type of insects they find. You don't want to use these interfaces on a mobile phone for large volume data entry...or you can't use it for large volume data entry ...it's just too clumsy.

**Jo:** Yes

**Leo:** But games are usually reaction based – you know there's a tick-box and according to this, you do something else or you click on something and you choose a path through some game or assessment Flash-based assessment tool. So, it's really more a click interface and low-volume data entry, so it's quite easy to enter temperatures or the number of a certain insect that you've seen on your trip or things like that. Once you're ready to save the input, the input would then be saved back into the data base –and in that case it's a Moodle data base.

**Jo:** So, how does that happen – that happens wirelessly does it?

**Leo:** Wireless...the phones that support Flash are all GPRS compliant – you probably can't get a phone these days that's not GPRS compliant.

**Jo:** Yeah, so how does that enable you to save it into Moodle? Is that what you are saying?

**Leo:** If the phone has GPRS on it and the user has set it up correctly, you basically are able to connect to the Internet.

**Jo:** Oh, I see what you mean –OK yep.

**Leo:** So, Flash will just use a http reference or web service on the Moodle web server to save the data back.

**Jo:** OK.

**Leo:** So I mean we have two Flash movies that are doing that at the moment.

**Jo:** So what do you think the implications are for educational providers in that then?

**Leo: Yeah I mean** I never saw mobile learning to sort of replace existing learning structures – and bear in mind, this is not an educational speaking –I’m a technical propeller head that’s worked a lot in education. I’m probably not the best person to ask educational questions. My view on this is that it is never going to replace existing e-learning technologies but I think it can provide some very good additions to existing Toolboxes, content, wherever you want to have students roaming around being mobile, out and about –which is usually is not tasks where they do a lot of writing or content entry anyway, I think that it could be quite a valuable addition to the...to the learning process.

**Jo:** So field work and that sort of thing?

**Leo:** Field work, low-volume data entry, anything that’s location-based –it’s getting a bit of a trickier area there (location-based) at the moment (it) is reasonably expensive because you still need GPRS or GPS navigation devices which are not really on the low price spectrum and not currently in high volume phones, although that will be changing very soon.

**Jo:** Ok. So that’s two of your projects –and was there something else you were talking about –a different sort of mobile learning project?

**Leo:** Year, the one we had a discussion about last time we met in Melbourne I think, that’s the 2D Label project. Which is at the moment I’ve got it on ice –just not enough time in a day to work on all of those and really in the end, being a small organisation, we have to sort of work where we find the projects, and in that area we haven’t found anybody to.....willing to sponsor something like that.

**Jo:** So tell us a bit about the idea behind it.

**Leo:** The idea behind it –it’s really At the moment, RFID seems to be the rage in Australia in terms of location-based services yeah... in the m-learning sector when you look at the EdNA forums and things like that. I’ve been working with RFI –research in that area for quite a while –over four years now and by background –I’m actually an agricultural engineer and that technology is actually quite old hat. Livestock identification systems have been using RFID for I don’t know, quite a while –probably fifteen/twenty years.

**Jo:** So what is 2D then?

**Leo:** The problem with RFID is you need very sophisticated equipment which is not currently available on mobile phones. And even with PDAs, it's a reasonably expensive add-on. So you need reader technology that is a. expensive, b. clumsy and c. it's an add-on so you won't have it integrated in an existing device. The 2D technology is pretty similar, instead of having to read a tag, that in the case of a RFID tag, you're reading wirelessly, you'd be reading it via the phone camera.

**Jo:** Oh I see yeah...

**Leo:** So, any camera phone, or most camera phones –let's put it that way, will be able to use it. You basically take a photo that's two-dimensional (I can send you a photo of one of these 2D labels) and these labels can be printed with a normal laser printer or ink jet printer and laminated and stuck somewhere. So for a few cents, you can actually produce these labels yourself. So, a) the labels are a lot more... a lot less expensive than the RFID labels and b) the reader technology is readily available in the form of a camera phone.

**Jo:** So in an educational context, how would that work?

**Leo:** In an educational context...for example in a...we've been looking at it as an idea in a workshop scenario, where there is... engineering at TAFE for example, they've got a lot of ...a number of machines and workshops. At the moment, people would have to find out what that machine is and then read the instructions. What you could do with a technology like that is that a student uses one of those phones, takes a photo of the 2D label on the device and the device retrieves the information as part of a learning object. So it would tell you safety concerns – Step one, you have to do this with this machine, Step two, is that...

**Jo:** OK, I get the picture.

**Leo:** that's one example.... a second example is a... God what are they called ...an arboretum...the tree...where you can fix these labels on a tree, then people can roam around in the garden/forest (whatever it is) , botanical garden, take a photo of that 2D label and it will retrieve (the information) –actually I have that working already with some Eucalyptus variety as an example.

**Jo:** Sounds fantastic!

**Leo:** So that's sort of the educational impact of that technology and I'm quite surprised that it hasn't been taken up quicker than that.

**Jo:** Oh well, let's hope that someone listens to this interview and comes and phones you straight away Leo! That would be good wouldn't it? (laughs)

**Leo:** Yeah that'd be good....I certainly wouldn't say no to that. We spend a lot of time on these things and you can see the advantages, but as I said, as a small organisation –you have to be realistic and put your priorities sort of where the projects are...and unfortunately in that regards we haven't really found any body yet.

**Jo:** OK, well nevertheless, we'll keep an eye out for updates on your conference presentation from your Bright Cookie website and thanks very much for speaking with The Knowledge Tree.

**Leo:** That's alright. No worries.

## Useful Links

Bright Cookie

<http://www.brightcookie.com>

Benefits of 2D labels

<http://www.cellular-news.com/story/18974.php>

RFID tags

<http://www.flexilis.com/epassport.html>

<http://www.rfidwasher.com/>

## **Book Review: *Mobile learning: A handbook for educators and trainers* by Kukulska-Hulme A. & Traxler J. (eds.) 2005.**

Mobile learning can be spontaneous, portable, personal, situated; it can be informal, unobtrusive, ubiquitous and disruptive. It takes us much nearer to 'anytime, anywhere' learning but it is still too early to predict how our understandings of learning and teaching will evolve as a consequence (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2005: 42)

If mobile learning is defined as learning that is not restricted to a particular location and which can occur whilst 'on the move' then mobile learning is not a new phenomenon. For example, print based technologies and audiotapes have been used in both campus-based and distance learning for many years. These mobile technologies can be used beyond the classroom and whilst in transit whether that be on a bus, train or aircraft.

In a contemporary sense, the use of the term mobile learning is being applied to '...the possibilities opened up by portable, lightweight devices that are sometimes small enough to fit in a pocket or in the palm of one's hand' (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2005:1). Examples of technologies that fall within the scope of mobile learning include mobile phones, smart phones, palmtops, and handheld computers (Personal Digital Assistants or PDAs); Tablet PCs, laptop computers and personal media players (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2005). These devices provide facilities that include:

- communication (e.g. voice phone, short messaging service (SMS), multimedia messaging serve (MMS))
- capturing and playing e-books, sound, still and video images, animations
- organising capabilities (e.g. clock, alarm, GPS, diary, contact details)
- access to the Internet
- word-processing, spreadsheet and database capabilities
- data entry through keypad, graffiti facility, audio capture, still and video photography, download of files.

Two characteristics distinguish this modern version of digital mobile learning from previous analog versions:

1. the capacity of devices to capture, store and share large volumes of data
2. the convergence of previously separate facilities.

So what are the implications of mobile learning for teaching practices? What are the possibilities, problems, barriers and institutional issues?

*Mobile learning. A handbook for educators and trainers* (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2005) provides a useful introductory text that considers a range of technical and pedagogic issues associated with contemporary mobile learning. They also consider accessibility issues. The text provides 12 case studies that include the use of a range of mobile devices in the fields of Italian language, medical studies, music composition and student organisation across a range of contexts.

Reasons offered for using mobile devices relate to improved access, evaluation and enhancement of learning and teaching, exploration of learners' requirements and behaviours and alignment with institutional or business aims (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler

2005). These reasons are remarkably similar to those that have been used to promote flexible learning, workplace learning, online learning and e-learning in earlier years. One might ask if these reasons have been justified by evaluation? Certainly the research into 'online learning' is, at best, ambiguous about such claims in respect to increased access, improved learning and reduced costs (Guthrie 2003).

Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler claim that '...[m]obile devices open up new opportunities for independent investigations, practical fieldwork, professional updating and on-the-spot knowledge. They can also provide opportunities for improved learner support and guidance, and for more efficient course administration and management' (2005:26). Such claims relate to the perspectives of learning, student support and administration. If the experience of non-mobile technology reported by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2005) is repeated then we may find that the benefits of mobile technologies relate more to increases in the efficiency and effectiveness of student support and administration than to changes in the design of teaching programs or learning practices in on-campus institutions.

In conclusion Kukulska-Hulme and Traxler (2005) note the following.

The success of mobile learning may well depend on the pedagogical tasks that the devices are used for, and on the integration of tasks within a well defined pedagogical approach. (Kukulska-Hulme & Traxler 2005:192)

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Kukulska-Hulme, A. & Traxler, J. (eds.) 2005. *Mobile learning. A handbook for educators and trainers*. Open and flexible learning series, Routledge, London.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2005, *E-learning in tertiary education. Where do we stand?* OECD, Paris.

## Live Conversation

A live online 'conversation' with our lead writer, Nancy White will follow the Edition 11 release, allowing users to discuss and debate articles and surrounding issues in greater depth and contribute to the knowledge sharing.

**To join Nancy White on 25 September at 2pm Australian EST go to:**

<https://sas.illuminate.com/m.jnlp?sid=995&miuid=6EF957A67F2E379BB999DCB648384907>

The 'conversation' will run in conjunction with activities run by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's (Framework) E-learning Networks Project.

An archived recording of the conversation will be available following the session from: <https://sas.illuminate.com/mr.jnlp?suid=M.7359EDBF1E558A5CF3D7940AF8F4E0>

For more about the 'conversation' and how to participate visit: <http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/networks>

Details of how to set up and configure your aggregator and mobile device are available in *The Knowledge Tree* space at <http://flexiblelearning.net.au/knowledgetree>