

Advancing Professional Learning with Collaborative Technologies

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The future has already arrived. It's just not evenly distributed yet.

William Gibson

INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, learning and Internet-based technologies are becoming increasingly interwoven. For a growing proportion of children in the developed world, blogs, social networking, multiplayer online games, and instant messaging systems are figuring significantly in their daily lives (Sefton-Green, 2004; Somekh, 2004). Education systems have, for a long time, recognized the potential of technology to enhance and enrich teaching and learning; however, the realization of that potential has more often than not been disappointing (Cuban, 2001; Somekh, 2001). In Australia, we continue to receive strong statements from the Government about the educational importance of integrating ICT into teaching and learning (cf. Learning in an Online World, MCEETYA, 2005); but the reality is, schools and universities are struggling to achieve such goals.

BACKGROUND

The Partnerships in ICT Learning (PICTL) project was an Australian Government Quality Teacher Program funded by the Department of Science, Education and Training (DEST), and the Australian Curriculum Studies Association (ACSA). Eight projects were initiated across each state and territory, and recommendations were made to the DEST about school-based models for ICT learning in preservice and teacher professional-learning communities.

This chapter reports on the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) project that was designed to explore the use of collaborative technologies with preservice teachers. Research has shown that the preparation of ICT-savvy teachers is a pressing problem that requires schools and teacher education institutions to work together to develop more effective approaches (Downes,

Fluck, Gibbons, Leonard, Matthews, Oliver, Vickers, & Williams, 2002). The effective integration of technology into teacher education courses positively impacts on school ICT practices (Franklin, 2007). The work reported here was founded on the understanding that ICT integration requires educators to consider issues of innovation and reform in their own practices before they address wider integration issues. The ACT project was a pilot research project designed to integrate collaborative technologies into a preservice pedagogy unit as a way of initiating a professional dialogue about the use of information and communication technologies (ICT).

The key aims of this project were to:

- Investigate how various technologies, such as blogs and team learning systems, can be used to foster collaboration; and,
- Assist preservice teachers to reflect upon their understanding of the conditions that motivate teachers to expand their use of ICT.

Project Design

In this project, we worked with 12 final-year preservice teachers enrolled in a core Secondary Teaching Studies (Technology) unit at the School of Education and Community Studies at the University of Canberra. In this pedagogy unit, we devised a series of university-based experiences, where the students learnt to use new technologies, and considered the facilitation models that would promote ICT integration. The ACT project made use of two emerging technologies: the Zing meeting system (<http://anyzing.com>); and Elgg (<http://elgg.net>), a blogging and social networking application. While these students had already completed a core ICT in Education unit, they had not previously used either blogs or Zing.

The Zing system connects multiple keyboards to a shared collaborative space, and was originally designed as a meeting system for business. Work with Zing has shown that when users meet in this way, they are able

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