



Network for Education, Ageing and Technology

ICT as a platform for collaboration, information sharing and learning

The Network for Education, Ageing and Technology (NEAT) is an email listserv that is intended to ‘bring together a range of people with an interest in the implications and use of technology by and for the benefit of, older people’ (Foskey et al, 2001, p. 1).

Bonding, bridging and linking

NEAT operates out of the Institute for Rural Futures at the University of New England, in northern New South Wales. It started in December 1999 from a project called *Making the connections: non-metropolitan older people and technology* when a core group of people came together through Internet chat sessions, videoconferencing and a conference at the university around the subject of education, ageing and technology.

The listserv is open to anyone who has an interest in the cross-sectoral area of education, ageing and technology. It includes academics, researchers, community members, service providers in the health and education sectors, both formal and community, and government representatives. The members come from all over Australia and represent the interests of people in metropolitan, rural, regional and remote areas. As well, several members belong to similar international listservs, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE) in the UK and the Canadian Network for Third Age Learning (CATALIST).

Benefits

The social sustainability of the list is facilitated by the bonding and linking of members, and the trust and reciprocity between members and the list manager, who plays a vital role. The value of the list to the members is the reason it survives and is sustainable. The list manager comments: ‘I believe the list will only exist as long as the members see some value from its existence.’

A sense of community is an underlying element in the ongoing success of NEAT. It is underpinned by mutual sharing, cooperation and support within a group of people with common interests. Key to this sense of community is that boundaries are placed around membership. Members are introduced by word of mouth or through awareness-raising work such as conference papers, journal articles and website information, and also through links to other local and global networks. Membership is fluid and dynamic, with people leaving as their work or interests change and new members joining.



This fluidity is seen to contribute to the sense of community and to be reflective of the changes that take place in any community. It is seen to provide different perspectives and contribute to the development and building of knowledge.

The list manager commented, 'I think it is important to understand NEAT as a community of practice built on a foundation of interpersonal relationships, as a venue in which we can extend our sense of identity beyond the local, and beyond the specific to a wider arena. Some of the relationships built through NEAT are both virtual and physical, and some purely virtual. The community operates informally rather than being bound

within any organisation, so hierarchy plays no role, and this means that some issues around rules and expectations which may arise within a formal organisation simply have not surfaced on this listserve.'

Trust is built through the membership boundaries, the introduction of new members, assumptions around a common focus and the informal rules of interaction. One of the members of the list commented: 'Trust and reciprocity is exemplified by members who ask for help, confident that someone will respond with solutions from their own experience or suggestions of who to ask for further assistance.'

The list manager says that trust is central. 'We trust that people involved with the list have an interest beyond self-promotion. Rather, our goal is the diffusion of the information we gain and learning we undertake as members of the list within the other communities with which



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we are involved. Trust is also built in the ways in which members “walk the talk”: the way, for example, we cooperated and collaborated to participate in the Global Ageing conference in Perth, or the National Office of the Information Economy’s Seniors Online Day.’

Many members comment that NEAT has expanded their social networks considerably. In most cases, virtual contact is the primary source of knowledge of others, only occasionally supplemented by face-to-face contact.

The nature of the list has led to increased bonding, bridging and linking capital. Bonding capital is cemented through frequent online contact with others with the same interest and toward a common goal. Bridging capital is evident through intersecting networks facilitated by a member who spans two or more networks. For example, a bridge made between NEAT and the UK list ‘Older and Bolder’ is expanding current contacts and resources in an exponential manner. Linking capital is evident as the members of the list span the range of fields. Individuals access different types of power structures which can be called upon and harnessed to achieve particular goals.

Barriers

Economic sustainability has been a problem for NEAT. It is an unfunded initiative, and despite many efforts to secure funding it is not seen as fitting within any funding source due to its lack of structure. The list is dependent economically on the goodwill of the University of New England and the list manager. While it is hoped that the list could continue if there were changes in this support, NEAT is in a somewhat unstable position. The manager commented that the very thing that is the strength of the community is also its weakness—the fact that it is not formally structured.



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The lack of funding has also limited the development and work of the list members as a group. The manager states: ‘We could have been a far more powerful advocacy body influencing policy, practice and funding decision. We have been held back because economic and social goals are still seen by many funding agencies as being mutually exclusive.’



Key lessons

- Economic sustainability may be problematic for online communities as they fall outside traditional funding parameters.
- A lack of funding places limitations on the development and work of the community.
- The support of a list manager is essential to the social sustainability of the list and in facilitating connections between members.
- The social networks of individual members are expanded and reinforced, contributing to higher levels of bonding, bridging and linking capital.
- Trust is an underlying element of the network and is facilitated by the boundaries placed on membership, the reputation of individuals and the rules of interaction.

References

Foskey, R. (2002) 'Education, Ageing and Technology: Intersecting Networks'. Paper presented to Electronic Networks – Building Community 5th Community Networking Conference, 4th July 2002, Melbourne.

Foskey, R., Hazzlewood, J., Barnett, K. & Lewis, R. (2001) NEAT – *Network for Education, Ageing and Technology – Helping to bridge geographical and sectoral barriers*. Paper presented for the Council on the Ageing National Conference, 11-13 November 2001, Canberra.

Resource website: www.ruralfutures.une.edu.au/projects/socchange/retire/neat/neat.htm

COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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