Australian Flexible Learning Framework
supporting e-learning opportunities

The Knowledge Tree – Edition 21

Inclusivit-e

Are digital natives restless?

In this article, Victor Callan, Annie Fergusson and Melanie Worrall provide an overview of upcoming research into how young learners engage with new technologies, and how technology can act as an enabler for youth disengaged from traditional learning approaches.

Professor Victor Callan is Professor and Research Director at the University of Queensland Business School, presenting regularly on the latest VET sector developments. He has an international research reputation in the fields of management and workforce development, with eight books, more than 200 refereed journal publications, and 30 book chapters. v.callan@business.uq.edu.au

Annie Fergusson is the Business Manager of the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's Benchmarking and Research Business Activity. She has more than 15 years experience working in the VET system, as both a manager and facilitator in private and public RTOs and co-author of the 2005 conference paper 'Strategies to assist disengaged youth to make the transition to learning and earning'. annie.fergusson@sa.gov.au

Melanie Worrall is the Project Officer at the Australian Flexible Learning Framework's Benchmarking and Research Business Activity and is passionate about learning and the many forms it takes. She has worked with Framework in a number of roles, including lecturer, instructional/educational designer, and Project Manager of a learning materials resource development project. melanie.worrall@sa.gov.au

Technology at work and play

In order to assist disengaged young learners, it is important to consider how the general Australian youth population uses technology at home, socially and at work. Understanding this is vital if practitioners and employers want to better tailor learning and work environments around the needs and preferences of younger learners. That's why the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (Framework) has recently commissioned research into how we can build upon disengaged young people's existing knowledge and positive experiences of new technologies.

A key outcome of this research will be to inform and influence VET stakeholders to continue to build *their* understanding of the relationship between young people's technology use and its impact on their employment and education choices.

Prior to the global financial crisis, Australia's youth (15 – 24) unemployment rate was at its lowest since the 1970s. Between 2008 and 2009, however, the teenage unemployment rate rose from 12.2 per cent to 18.5 per cent – one of the largest annual increases in 20 years. In response, the Federal Government introduced a wide range of actions, including the Youth Compact, which includes new targets for the attainment of Year 12 or equivalent and the National Strategy for Young Australians. Through its National Youth Participation Requirement, the Compact with young Australians makes participation in education, training or employment compulsory for all young people until they reach the age of 17 years (COAG 2009). It also sets a target of 90 per cent Year 12 or equivalent attainment for the next decade.

TVET Australia provides high quality professional services that support the national training system in building Australia's skill base and fostering social and economic development. TVET recognises the Youth Compact strategy as having a key impact on VET policy in 2009 – 2010 (TVET 2009). In addition, TAFE Directors Australia and the Australian College of Educators have added their weight to the need to respond better to Australian youth's training, employment and education needs. For instance, TAFE Directors Australia said Australia needed to 'rethink many of its current approaches to the delivery of vocational skills to young people' (TDA 2009: 6).

The challenge for our schools and Vocational Education Training (VET) providers is to develop and sustain vocational programs that engage, support and motivate young people to build the skills required to complete Year 12 or its equivalent, and to move on to work or further study. We know that young people who are fully engaged in work or study are happier (*ibid*). Yet only 21 per cent of unemployed young Australians report that they feel 'very happy' about their career prospects, as against the 60 per cent for those in full-time work. For these and many other reasons (eg Australia's skills shortage), there is a major challenge afoot to re-engage unemployed young people and disengaged learners so that they are more confident about becoming lifelong learners and earners.

In a context where COAG has set a 90 per cent target completion rate for those who turn 19 in 2015, the focus is now on well-structured and targeted vocational education and training for young people in the post-compulsory years. Among these actions is the inclusion of more vocationally focused learning in secondary curricula, seen as a powerful strategy for addressing the attrition of those young people designated as 'less academically inclined' (Stanley 2007).

Get with the program

We already know that learning programs are more likely to motivate youth to build skills when their environments are comfortable and more appealing than those provided by more traditional teaching methods. (Young & Fergusson 2004; Lewanski et al 2010; Maltby & Mackie 2009).

An emphasis on learner-centred approaches that provide more flexibility in delivery – and more opportunities for personalised learning – is critical to achieving these more positive VET outcomes. In addition, more successful VET programs:

- acknowledge learning styles and learning preferences
- provide applied, experiential work-related and work-based learning approaches
- know the value of collaborative learning and assessment, designed to develop teamwork.

While traditional methods can meet these expectations, e-learning is more able to more consistently provide such flexible, tailored and experiential learning environments (*ibid)*. It is important to better understand the full potential of new technologies in motivating and engaging youth to learn and earn. That is why there is a call for further research into how the skills gained in more informal learning environments are transferred to more formal learning environments.

For example, Dana Boyd has shown how young people use social network sites like MySpace and Facebook to mark their identity and to socialise with their peers (Boyd 2008). As young people learn to navigate social network sites, they also develop new strategies that shape how they engage with other environments that involve people and technology (eg training and work).

On the other hand, young people's technological skills may not match what his required for technologically enabled learning in training and educational settings. Contrary to the stereotype that all young people are 'digital natives', previous Framework projects reveal that while young people can have high level skills in some areas (eg social networking or email), their skill levels are not consistent across other technologies. Practitioners using e-learning with younger learners must clearly understand which skills transfer across formal and informal learning environments, and the skills differences that exist between more and less engaged learners.

Re-evaluating pedagogy

As the momentum shifts towards more interactive and collaborative teaching and learning activities, current pedagogy about effective use of new technology may also require re-evaluation (Salmon 2006; Mason 2002). In line with this position, Figgis and Guthrie (2009) identify the need for research that builds on our understanding of 'heutagogy', or how technology promotes more self-determined learning and creates new learning cultures. This relatively new development represents a transition from pedagogy (ie teacher-centred) through andragogy (ie learner-centred) to heutagogy (ie recognising the increasing complexity of learning and the implications for learners) (Hase 2009)).

Finally, it is important to consider the motivational, affective and cognitive factors that impact upon young people's willingness to engage in learning, and why some disengaged learners are more willing to re-engage in learning than others (Mackie 2001). Resistance to learning is caused by many factors, including:

- anxiety
- low levels of numeracy and literacy
- negative learning experiences in the past
- poor self-concept and poor self-efficacy.

Poorly committed learners tend to show poorer self-efficacy, with a subsequent lack of control over events and greater feelings of helplessness (*ibid*, Maltby & Mackie 2009).

Given these issues, The Framework, through its Benchmarking and Research Business Activity, has commissioned research that will involve the development of an Issues Paper. The Paper will result from national consultation with youth, VET practitioners, and those who support disengaged learners in community and VET settings. The research will also take a practical approach and include a series of national 'think tanks' to explore key topics drawn from the eventual Issues Paper. The research will commence in October, with the national think tanks commencing in early 2011.

For more information, or if you would like to be involved in this research contact:

Benchmarking and Research Business Activity

Annie Fergusson

Phone: (08) 8226 0803

Email: annie.fergusson@sa.gov.au

Melanie Worrall

Email: melanie.worrall@sa.gov.au

Website: http://www.flexiblelearning.net.au/research

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