

# Networking technology making possible new forms of pedagogy

Carrick project exploring possible uses for social software in academic circles



**F**ACEBOOK, YOUTUBE, DEL.ICIO.US, wikis, blogs... many students are already using these technologies for social purposes now a project funded by the Carrick Institute is investigating whether they can be useful as a supplementary social ground for their in-class learning.

The Digital Learning Communities (DLC) project led by the University of Canberra, in partnership with RMIT University and Queensland University of Technology, is investigating the application of social software to support networked learning.

Social software provides innovative and interactive opportunities for students to engage with the mentors, practitioners and wider community, who become actively involved in the students learning experience by providing comments, help and suggestions.

"There is a lot of hype around social networking applications though the key ele-

ment for our project is how they support sociability. Being social as part of a community of scholars is fundamental to high quality learning," says Dr Robert Fitzgerald, project leader at the University of Canberra.

Building on this social aspect of technology may offer new pedagogical opportunities. Fitzgerald believes there is a role for technology to help strengthen connections between students, their peers, teachers and the wider community.

"Students construct their knowledge through a complex set of interactions with their peers, their lecturers and their university spaces. We need to find ways of continuing to facilitate those sorts of interactions with technology," Fitzgerald told *Communiqué*.

Collegiality between students and academics across disciplines and at different institutions could be another positive outcome of the project.

Fitzgerald argues that institutions could also benefit financially from integrating free, decentralised services into their curriculum. Other potential benefits include sharing and re-use of resources, greater awareness of best practice and expanding notions of peer review.

A multitude of social networking services already exist. The DLC project is investigating ways these existing services might work in conjunction with institutional learning management systems.

"We are finding significant challenges as

most of our institutional information and communications systems are not designed to interoperate with other systems – especially systems that sit outside the university firewall," Fitzgerald says.

As students interact with decentralised user-owned technologies like Facebook and YouTube, Fitzgerald believes that institutions need to plan for learning environments that allow students to develop their own learning landscapes by connecting university services with external web resources and services.

Another concern of the project is ensuring that students in future own and control their learning data.

"Students need a space that's independent of universities to some extent, that will house their data and e-portfolios. Universities will provide the interconnections with those spaces and the university systems."

Pilot projects have been established incorporating technologies including wikis blogs del.icio.us, MyToons and Drupal into courses. For example MyToons was incorporated into the teaching of animation in a New Media course. Blogs are being used to document field work and help develop a community of practice in environmental science. In pilot projects these technologies are located on external servers and networks for accessibility.

A wiki-based social software 'CookBook' collating possible uses of social software in teaching and learning is also under development as part of the project.

"The future of universities is about collaboration, it's not about competition, let's ensure our information systems actually foster collaboration," Fitzgerald says.

He would like to see higher education modelled more on wikis – "sharing, exchange, creative commons licensing made available for more than one university".

Fitzgerald is also looking at the application of social networking technologies to other aspects of academic work such as building a social networking environment for 20 researchers working on a Cambodian development project.

"How we stay connected as a research community and how we share information with our stakeholders is fundamental to doing good research as it's fundamental to doing good teaching and learning."

