

NEW AND EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

From a distance: using emerging technology to organise a study about emerging technology

A fortunate series of events and happy coincidences in October 2008 resulted in CAVAL Ltd, Dominican University (USA), and CityLibraries Townsville agree to partner in a research project that would see Dr Michael Stephens appointed as the CAVAL 2009 Visiting Scholar, and make a five week trip to Australia in September/October 2009.

How to go about organising a multi-faceted research project, a five-week international visit, and three speaking engagements when you're over 14 000 km (as the crow flies) and 16 time zones apart?

MS: The aim of the research project is to evaluate the impact of Learning 2.0 programs in Australian libraries. Learning 2.0 (also known as 23 Things) is all about exposing staff to new and emerging technologies. We used a variety of new and not-so-new electronic and web-based tools ourselves, to communicate, share files, and organise the research materials. Have you thought about why we used what we did?

WC: It seems to have been a combination of things. Tools like email and instant messaging were well established tools that we both used, so were quick and easy ones to get the conversations going.

MS: Leading up to the trip, we used Skype for a lot of conversations with Richard Sayers from CAVAL. I appreciated how I could be anywhere: on campus, at home, on holiday in northern Michigan, and still check in via voice and video. Sitting in front of my iMac at home with the speakers going, it was almost like we were all in the same room having a meeting. The power of hearing a voice so clearly without using the phone is amazing.

WC: Corporate firewalls and rules prevented me from using Skype on my work computer, so we managed to install it on a public internet computer in the library instead. Skype proved to be very clear and easy to use for three-way conversations and was a great aid to planning Michael's research trip. Just recently I discovered Skype as a portable application, which I can run off a USB thumb-drive from most PCs, which is very convenient.

MS: Were there any other tools we used that were new to you? How was the learning curve?

WC: I had heard about Dropbox but had never used it. It only took me a few minutes to realise how incredibly useful it is, and a day to become an ardent fan! We were able to share files quickly and easily by saving them to a shared Dropbox folder, accessible via the web or as a folder on my local computer's folder list.

MS: The use of Dropbox to share documents and easily host a file on the web made it invaluable to me. I had many files I wanted to keep safe but with me at all times during the travel. One thing I did was use a folder in Dropbox to sync all of the travel documents provided to me from CAVAL or the airlines/hotels. I could access the files from my Mac, any web enabled computer, and even with my iPhone on wifi!

WC: I know you are a huge fan of the Apple iPhone. How did it go as a travel tool in another country?

MS: I opted not to be on one of the very expensive data plans for international travellers via the iPhone's sole provider in the states, AT&T. I could still use it as a phone with international calling but

data was crippled and I have to admit I felt really disconnected from my usual patterns of use. Of course, I could connect to free wireless if it was available and use the phone for data but that didn't happen often. One night we struck out on a dining choice and without wifi I realized I couldn't just Google for vegetarian dining in Perth. It's amazing how I've come to rely on my device – and that's why I highlight mobile use in my talks about trends and tech. It truly is a game changer for information consumption.

WC: Our methods of technology-enabled communication certainly did go way beyond email.

MS: I'm also thinking about all the times we used Twitter to check in with each other with news or updates. We also did a lot of sharing of our steps and planning with our followers.

WC: Did you use any specialised electronic tools during the focus groups?

MS: We actually used an application on the Mac called GarageBand to record all of the focus group sessions. It made it very easy to use the Mac for this purpose instead of carrying another dedicated device like a digital recorder. GarageBand mixes down the files to MP3s that can be loaded into iTunes for review after the focus group concludes. I saved the files to Dropbox for sharing with Richard and the transcriptionist.

WC: Thanks for posting pictures of your Australian travels on Flickr. Apart from the simple act of sharing photographs, are there deeper uses of Flickr? Has it enabled you to work more effectively, or meet people via photo sharing?

MS: I relied on Flickr for many things. To share with friends and family back home, but also to discover what sites and scenery lay ahead as we travelled around Australia. I also use Flickr for Creative Commons images for my presentations and prepping for ASLA and QPLA conferences, including finding some wonderful Australia-themed pictures to make the slides more local.

I also relied heavily on sites like TripAdvisor for user contributed reviews of hotels, dining options, and attractions. Pair that with Google Maps for seeing where a hotel might be located in relation to RMIT or the Perth convention centre (complete with street view in many instances) and you have a dynamic trip planning mechanism.

WC: All of these things helped the trip and research run smoothly. We're looking forward to presenting the first results of the research at VALA2010.

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Reference List

Apple iPhone	http://www.apple.com/au/iphone/
Dropbox	www.dropbox.com
Flickr	www.flickr.com
GarageBand	http://www.apple.com/ilife/garageband/
Google Maps	http://maps.google.com.au
iTunes	http://www.apple.com/itunes/
Skype	www.skype.com
TripAdvisor	www.tripadvisor.com
Twitter	www.twitter.com