Exploring opportunities for collaboration

With the development of the Ultranet as a virtual learning space and the new physical spaces being built, there is a unique opportunity to investigate the links between these inputs and learning outcomes. Dr Elizabeth Hartnell-Young, Group Manager, Research, recently undertook a research study tour to share Victorian practice and develop research collaborations.

The Department’s Research Branch interviewed Dr Hartnell-Young about her study and some of its main findings.

Q: What was the purpose of your recent trip to Finland and the UK?

A: I wanted to tell others about the Ultranet and our new buildings and to discover new methods and evidence to help us evaluate physical and virtual learning spaces and student outcomes.

I presented a seminar at the University of Nottingham and a paper at the Association of Learning Technologies Annual Conference. I also visited kindergartens and schools, and met with educators and researchers in both countries.

Q: Can you tell us about your seminar presentation?

A: I based my presentation on a recently-completed DEECD literature review to guide the evaluation of learning spaces, and the OECD/CERI Innovative Learning Environments research project. Thirty people attended, and there was a lot of lively discussion around the framework for evaluating learning spaces proposed in the literature review.

Generally the link between spaces and learning outcomes has not been researched in depth, although many countries are realising the importance of capturing new practices and their effects on student learning. The feedback from the seminar and subsequent meetings has been incorporated into the planning and conceptual framework for the DEECD program of research into learning spaces.

Q: What are some of the concepts that drive the design of physical and virtual learning spaces?

A: Flexibility, openness and mobility were overarching concepts, and I saw some interesting and imaginative spaces in some schools, particularly in a school for the physically and intellectually disabled. In others, however, in spite of a comprehensive consultation process, the designs reflected most people’s past experience, such as long corridors and spaces apparently designed for one teacher with a class of thirty students.

Q: How are other countries using learning platforms?

A: There is a trend towards open and flexible learning. In many situations, people are crossing the boundary between formal (credentialled) and informal learning by using mobile devices linked to a learning platform to access, create and store online resources. Both the UK and Finland have promoted small-scale learning platforms, which, unlike the Ultranet, cater only for a City or Local Authority. Finland is currently sponsoring a national ICT research program in cooperation with business and industry to plan learning environments which use social media and mobile learning in the everyday life of the school.
Q. What are some of the findings emerging from research programs such as those underway in Finland?

A: Just like in Australia, the Finnish studies are recommending that schools to adopt student-centred working methods supporting communal modes of studying; that schools and businesses develop partnerships; that pre-service education is reviewed to meet future needs in terms of ICT; and that the skills of educators and school management in relation to ICT are updated. I visited one school near Helsinki where small local technology businesses (rather than Nokia or Microsoft) worked closely to address the emerging needs of teachers and learners by developing targeted solutions and devices. Some of these are intended to be scaled up for use across the country.

Q. What did you learn from your study tour?

A: I was surprised by the growth in open content since I worked in England only two years ago. Universities are making their resources freely available to learners in other countries. There is also an emphasis on open source software programs that are freely shared.

Internationally, there is an urgent need to develop a stronger evidence base in terms of physical and virtual spaces for learning, evaluation, policy development, infrastructure investment and practice. Becta, the British Educational Communications Technology Agency, has been closed, and part of it merged into the Department for education. There are real opportunities for collaboration between DEECD and Australian and international researchers to research important questions of common interest.


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This interview was featured in the Research eLert (December 2010), available at: http://www.education.vic.gov.au/researchinnovation/resources/researchelert.htm