Creativity and social capital through digital technologies in the Kwinana senior community.

Biographies:

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This paper will take the following form: We will describe our project and it's funding, before moving on to broader definitions of the research's paradigms and discussing our relationship with *Tenantspin*,[i] the innovative UK project that has acted as our model, and the Foundation for Art and Creative Technologies [ii] which is helping us to facilitate this research as a funding partner. We will conclude with a brief examination of the project's proposed outcomes and educational implications.

Our teaching at the (**name**) has been based on the premise of an intercultural praxis ((**name**), 2001, 2001a, 2003), in which the idea of the reflexive practitioner is absolutely central. Given the increasingly transmissive model of teaching in a university system geared towards competency based, vocational outcomes, and the squeezing of opportunities to develop a Socratic university education, we wondered how our educational model might find an application outside the University in the wider community[iii] in order to build social capital[iv]?

Our project in Kwinana, (a suburb of Perth, and a fuller description of which will follow later) is a project in process that has taken eighteen months to establish. It is a project that is based on a body of ideas that are on one hand engaged with a past tradition of cultural practice rooted in community and collaborative action, and on the other engaged with the dynamic possibilities of digital culture with the milieu of the Internet (Wellman, 2001). The objectives of the project are to encourage individuals to refuse a passive relationship with what we might call colloquially, the media, and to take ownership of their own experiences. The

empowerment that researchers (Giddens, 1991; Salter, 2003) have identified that comes with self-actualisation is a phenomenon that has the capability to transform both individuals and, more importantly for this project, to enrich the social capital of the immediate community.

The purpose of the project is to encourage individuals to examine the formation of their lived experiences, and to engage actively in a discursive, creative analysis of them within the community. The project will introduce a community of senior citizens to time based digital media and encourage them to make short films about their lived experiences. The intention is to investigate ways in which the social capital of a community can be enriched by the shared telling of stories, and in particular the life narratives of individuals[v]. What becomes important about the process of digital film making for the participants is the reflexive engagement the individual is encouraged to make with the medium used, in particular to shatter the received attitudes of specialist engagement that surrounds it [vi], and still more importantly to engage actively with the audience who will watch the films, both during their production and after their showing. From the start of the project participants will be fully aware that they will be making these films for public exhibition in the local shopping centre, and ultimately on the Internet. We have no intention to disappear down the dull cul-de-sac of methodological discussion at this point, but the Action Research methodologies we have adopted in planning will also include participatory variants in which the filmmakers themselves will analyse and comment on the project as it unfolds [vii].

The project has been funded by four partners: Firstly, Kwinana Town Council who are providing conference and meeting rooms, the technical support for the Internet streaming of the films once made, and who will host an as yet unspecified web presence on their server. The Council has been very supportive and encouraging. Secondly, the Hub Shopping Centre, which is Kwinana's local shopping centre. The manager there has graciously provided premises and exhibition facilities, and all that it entails in maintenance costs. Thirdly, the research office at ECU, through the Faculty of Communications and Creative Industries has provided money for technical and infrastructure support. Fourthly, FACT, the Foundation for Art and Creative Technologies, the UK's leading organisation for the development, support and exhibition of film, video and new and emerging media, have been acting as host to the *Tenantspin* project, and have actively provided us with a practical model with which to develop the project, and will provide us with an international arena for the showing of the participants' work. *Tenantspin* is a live interactive Internet channel produced by High Rise tenants in Liverpool, UK, that "aims to promote resident participation in regeneration and social housing issues through constructive debate and shared experience" [viii]. Started in 1999 as a modest venture by *Superflex* [ix] with a handful of elderly tenants interested in using digital technologies as a vehicle for social activism, (an early programme for example, saw participants from the Sefton Park neighbourhood describe their experiences about developing a sense of community, and sharing their thoughts on the quality of Housing Trust repairs and their thoughts on Site Managers). *Tenantspin* now hosts many community programmes and has become a powerful voice in airing social issues in the UK. Discussions with members of FACT have been important in finding ways in which to localise and domesticate media production so that individuals and communities can acquire the ability to express themselves creatively, and to find the value of seeing themselves reflected in the world around them, rather than remain the passive consumers of multinational media conglomerates. Preliminary

and lengthy discussions were held with a number of Industry committees to canvas support for the project, but relationships between local industry and the community at Kwinana is historically troubled, and the Kwinana Industries Council decided the project was potentially troublesome and withdrew, with a degree of acrimony, from any involvement with it.

This split between employee and employer in Kwinana is a constantly recurrent issue in the community. Kwinana was planned in the nineteen fifties as Perth's heavy industry sector. Populated by European migrants with industrial experience, for half a century it has sat uncomfortably alongside the received image of polite Perth's suburbs. Psychologically isolated from Perth because of its industrial culture, it is also a community largely adrift from any connections with mainstream Australian culture, with only 34% of the Town's population identifying with an Australian ancestry [x]. It is now a small township of twenty thousand; thirty minutes drive south of Perth on the freeway, and in the process of rapid urban change. It is a community in transition from an exclusively industrial town, to a community with a planned future as part of the commuter belt connected to the metropolitan centre by a new rail system (Allen, 2002). It has been a self-contained community, but is about to become one that is linked to the growing southern metropolitan population corridor. The town has been plagued in the past by multi-factor variables of disadvantage - poverty, unemployment, and inter-generational dependence on welfare (Walker, 2000). The community's transformation from a self sustained, close knit one, to a community acting as a host to metropolitan commuters in search of affordable housing is bound to change the internal dynamics of the community, and in its *Strategic Plan 2003 -2008*, the Town of Kwinana committed itself to strategies for community development and services in an attempt to manage the potential, perhaps inevitable, fracturing of the community on economic lines.

The senior community is constructed substantially of individuals who have worked in the local industrial plants. Seniors' use of digital technologies is low in comparison with national averages. In Kwinana the percentage usage of computer and Internet by the 65s and over was 13%. This compares unfavourably with Australia wide averages of 29% of Senior citizens using computers, and 21% using the Internet (ABS, 2003). Our project wishes to build on recent research by David Gauntlett (Gauntlett, 2004) that suggests our identities are to a large extent moulded by the new media, which in turn suggests digital technologies are an appropriate medium to analyse the multiple identities and multiple biographies of the constructed self as revealed by Anthony Giddens.

Although a well-established concept in the social sciences, Giddens' concept of the "actualisation of the self" (Giddens, 1991) has yet to be fully assimilated into institutionalised *creative* strategies. Whereas Giddens suggests that against the backdrop of mediated experience, self-identity becomes a reflexive endeavour, much research into creativity still refers to the 'autonomous' individual and his or her perception of the world [xi]. This innovative approach to the creative self has already been established in our teaching programme (**names** 2004). What is fundamental to this research project, (and which is reinforced by the use of Action Research as a research methodology) is the concept of the reflexive self, whose contingent nature is only sustained as coherent through the examination of constantly changing biographical narratives. This examination of the conditional nature of self-identity implies a reflexive framing of the creative individual within a social fabric.

Our interest in Kwinana's senior community members is pragmatic. Seniors are cognisant of change in their community more than most, and are also adversely affected by change if it is managed badly [xii]. They also exist, for better or worse, within a clearly identifiable and demarcated demographic. Researchers into the urban conditions and processes that shape social identity still use 'top down' definitions of the individual as the starting point for their investigation of urban social identities (Pol, 2002). Taijfel and Turner (Taijfel, 1978; Taijfel, 1981; Taijfel and Turner, 1986) who established this "social identity" research paradigm propose that the basis of social identity lies in the individual's identification with the group that he or she wishes to belong to. Group members identify with the elements that most characterise the group, attributing to themselves those characteristics. This definition of identity limits the individual to a dominant paradigm, and whilst this form of identification may strengthen self-esteem, it also only permits group cohesion through a process of depersonalisation (Turner, 1987).

The point of using seniors' life narratives and their sharing of them through time-based vignettes is an attempt to see how identity can be re-personalised. The process of creative self-actualisation is a 'bottom up' process, and has the potential to allow social identification to be revealed to the participant, allowing for reflexive cultural decision-making. In assisting in the creative self-actualisation of the aged individual, the research will attempt (through focus group analysis) to reveal the way in which social identity may be understood, not just individually but collaboratively.

Attempts to build the wider senior community's social capital is not new, neither are attempts to develop the senior community's engagement with digital and Internet technologies. The *First Click* programme is a Government funded initiative to engage older people with digital and Internet technologies. Unfortunately such approaches will always be limited in their use as an empowering educational mechanism, linked as they are to a competency based training model. Our research project is not about the acquisition of skills, (though basic skills will need to be learned), it is socially based, preferring to align itself with aspirations to link members of communities with one another, using digital technologies to help develop such communication; "If we want to be a prosperous, competitive, economically viable and socially inclusive society, we need to pay more attention to providing greater opportunities for everyone to learn – irrespective of who they are, where they live, what they do, or their previous educational attainments" (Candy cited in Hazzlewood, 2002).

The social and creative value of personal narrative is part of the institutional mainstream. The now defunct *Sixties Project* at the University of Virginia, U.S.A. is a good example of the way in which when personal narratives are made public they can inform an understanding of social capital. However the *Sixties Project* is indicative of a pre-digital model, which relies on a fixed institutionalised conception of a singular personal narrative. The *Sixties Project* was institutionally directed, this project differs in it is participant led, hence our use of Action Research. As project initiators rather than directors, we have no intention of acting as social missionaries. The fundamental component of successfully developing processes of self-actualisation within a social group is that of trust; the trust of the participants in the facilitator and co-participants (Giddens, 1991, Dahlgren, 2002). Given the socially transformative nature of the project the particular attributes of action research are ideally suited because of its

advocates' agenda of shared ownership of research projects, community based analysis of social problems, and an orientation toward community action (Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991; Forester, Pitt &Welsh, 1993; McTaggart 1997).

It is the *Tenantspin* project and its mutually beneficial relationship with FACT that has provided us with an equitable model in which individual experiences become communal property through Intranet and Internet broadcasting and the sharing of stories. The circumstances of the Liverpudlian participants however - with their radical political tradition, their cultural familiarity with physically close communal living in high rise, inner city apartment blocks, with prior membership of workers' writers groups and Housing Action Trusts – does not necessarily translate well into the different cultural environment of Kwinana. What both communities share is an ambivalent relationship to the 'reality' proposed by mainstream media views of their world. The sociologist Nicholas Couldry (Couldry, 2004) argues for the development of new exchanges of personal narratives that could break down the rigidity of existing imposed collective identity. It is easy to identify how the elderly *Tenantspin* participants removed themselves from the passive cosmopolitanism of consuming US sitcoms and substituted that experience with the active internationalism of promoting community media activism in a New York conference. It is this success, and others like them, that encourage us to think that Kwinana's seniors too, have the opportunity to decide whether this is a strategy they could follow [xiii]. Community wellbeing, Ricouer (Ricouer, 1995) implies, needs institutions and spaces where across differences of collective identity, life-world narratives (Habermas, 1985) can be exchanged. More mundanely, and fully cognisant of the hugeness of the project we have embarked on, it is to this purpose that in association with The Hub Shopping Centre, we plan to use the centre as the beginnings for the dialogue.

 Our research will question whether community participation can be enhanced using Internet technologies. This is not to suggest the Internet is a context without problems. The discussion within the current United Nations *World Summit on the Information Societies* Geneva 2003 – Tunis 2005 [xiv] exposes this fallacy in its attempt to strategise a digital economy for all people, not as it currently stands, as a resource for only one sixth of the world's population. A reflexive approach demands a relation of the global context to the local context of Kwinana.

Our aim is not to look at the Internet as a totalising space, but as a tool to re-establish community groups and build new and existing networks specifically for the senior's in Kwinana. To facilitate this is not without problems, and embedded within our approach is Habermas' concept of communicative action, meaning that the participants' identification of the *lifeworld* is essential for this model's success. Inherent within the lifeworld, and central to Habermas' theory is the notion of management of crises within individual narratives [xv]. The information discussed by the seniors and the life narratives they film are made visible for all of the community to access acting as a visual, shared form of self-actualisation.

We are hopeful that the notion of the Internet as a space of limited interactivity (Salter, 2003) can be challenged by our project, and that seniors can negotiate their perceptions of their lifeworld productively using digital technology. *Tenantspin* participants privileged their life narratives on the Internet in a way that challenged the usual paradigms of the medium's use. Their success encourages us, and like Salter (2003, p. 137) we are hopeful that the process

of Internet use "...is not predetermined. It is up to citizens, representatives, and political, social, and cultural movements to stake their own claims on the frontier."

The 'communicative' space Habermas talks of (Habermas 1985, 1987) has much potential for subsequent action within the physical realm as well as the virtual, providing a further context for discussion with the aim of active participation. Implicit to our research is the importance of the physical realm as supplemented by the virtual, not the virtual superseding the physical. We would wish to contextualise our research in much the same way as Barry Wellman (Wellman, 2001) does when he says, "computer networks are inherently social networks".

The seniors of *Tenantspin* are fully integrated into the social fabric of the Liverpool community, and have made an impact nationally and internationally and it is precisely this that we aim to facilitate in Kwinana. We can find no research into the potential of the aged community's creative self-actualisation through digital and Internet technologies has been undertaken in this country [xvi]. We hope that the significance of our research will rest in filling that gap. *Tenantspin* has been characterised by its framing within social activism and part of the uniqueness of the proposed research is the project's partnership with FACT and further collaborative attempts to develop transferable *creative* models of practice using digital technologies that are culturally specific, but inter-culturally applicable. It is hoped by the end of 2007 to have a number of short movies about life in Kwinana that will have been shown in the local community, and via the Internet to an international audience, and which will have been worthwhile enough to have created sufficient impetus to be a self-sustaining exercise for the community. If this project is successful the implications for life-long learning in the community are huge, suggesting a network of ethical and aesthetic value systems that are community based, and that can act either as an alternative, or as a supplement to, the broader meta-narratives of national economic and cultural aspirations.

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(http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Sixties.html)

[i] http://www.tenantspin.org

[ii] http://www.fact.co.uk/

[iii] By *community* we mean a group of people living in a particular area, but within this definition we are also acknowledging the concept of group subsets within a geographical community who have differing common cultural characteristics.

[iv] Putnam (1993, 2000) defines social capital as trust networks that facilitate coordinated actions. Cox (Cox, 1995) also uses this term because social capital implies quantification and measurement, and thus its benefits can be distributed, whilst its losses can be avoided.

[v] These films are not therapeutic in intent, although we are sure that will become part of their function. The visual and *visuality* (the quality, condition, or degree of being visible) are neglected devices in mainstream research into social issues, although they are well established in the therapeutic sciences (Carolan, R. 2001, Deaver, S.P., 2002). Our use of the visual in this arena of investigation is innovative as participant produced imagery is not interpreted *for* the individual (as is the traditional case in therapy) but is used *by* the individual as a means to explaining and establishing their relationships to their social surroundings.

[vi] Digital technologies and the Internet allow the rapid production and consumption of imagery by individuals that sidesteps the traditional, difficult and time consuming acquisition of representational skills. Digitally produced graphics and digital photography allow for an immediacy of expression, and a professionalism of product, that adds value to the project. One of the results of research into informal media education for young people was the observation that participants developed "a sense of self … an increase in self-confidence – related mainly to self-esteem and personal and social development, *but also to the use of media technologies.*" (our emphasis) It will be interesting to see if the same conclusions can be drawn with regard to the self esteem of senior citizens (Lord, P., Doherty, P. and Sefton-Green, J., 2002, p. 3).

[vii] What McTaggart calls *Critical Action Research* has emerged from educational action research, and commits itself to bring together broad social analyses; the self reflexive study of practice, the uses of language, and the organisation of power in a local situation. Critical Action research projects have typically included mixed networked groups of participants. This is ideally suited to the research design that will initially involve the participation of individuals, using visual languages, within the physical and social context of the shopping centre. (Carr and Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 1991; McTaggart, 1997; Zuber-Skerritt, 1996).

[viii] http://www.superchannel.org/Home/Profile/Channels/SPIN/index_html?client_timezone=GMT%2B8

[ix] Superflex are a Danish artists collective that work with communities to create a Superchannel streaming media broadcast. http://www.superchannel.org/Home/Info/Superchannel/History/

[x] 2001 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics.

[xi] C.F. *Creativity & Cognition 2005 A Creativity & Cognition Studios Conference*, Goldsmiths College. London 12-15 April 2005).

[xii] See this website regarding an extensive range of issues relevant to seniors community wellbeing http://www.cota.org.au/bibliogICT.htm, in particular Foskey, R., Hazzlewood, J, Barnett, K. and Lewis R. (2001) *NEAT- Network for Education, Ageing and Technology -Helping to bridge geographical and sectoral barriers.* Paper prepared for the Council on the Ageing National Conference 11th - 13th November 2001, Canberra, ACT.

[xiii] At this point we would reiterate our position as *facilitators*, and not *managers* of this project.

[xiv] http://www.itu.int/wsis/

[xv] It is our intention that through the Kwinana seniors constructing personal narratives via digital technology and thus identifying their 'lifeworld' via this media, they will become increasingly cognisant of the ways systemic media colonises identity. We hope this will contribute to their self-actualisation.

[xvi] As we have already indicated however there are plenty of strategies to engage the elderly with digital technology. C.F. Foskey, R.; Hazzlewood, J; Barnett, K. and Lewis R. (2001).