

Nine “mini biographies” outlining some characteristics of U3A Online participants

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Project background

U3A Online, the first U3A in cyberspace, was started in 1998. Its main aim was to provide interesting, intellectually challenging activities via the Internet for seniors who become isolated from mainstream activities in their community. Isolation is common in later life and is caused by many circumstances like bereavement, illness, disability, caring for others, inadequate transport and so on. The project has also proven popular with many other seniors who have been attracted by the wide variety of high quality courses, which have been written by retired volunteers.

Very little is known about the characteristics of older people who take the seemingly adventurous step of jumping into the comparative unknown of cyberspace in order to study something new. This paper clarifies some of the unknowns in the form of nine mini biographies. Volunteer journalist Cate Russell has compiled the stories from lengthy email answers to a series of lead questions, which were emailed to the participants.

Ten participants were initially invited to take part in an email study in which they were asked to provide lengthy responses to a series of questions about various aspects of their lives. From the outset the participants understood that they were volunteering to do something that entailed considerable thinking and writing. A guideline of three paragraphs was suggested as a minimum length for each email response. All ten agreed to take part. One subsequently dropped out. Of those who stayed with the 18-month program seven were females and two were males. Six lived in Australia, two in New Zealand and one in the UK. Apart from that nothing was known about them or their backgrounds.

In essence the method can be described as a modified grounded theory approach involving a cyberspace focus group. The intent was to use their discussions to uncover some of the unknown issues that relate to older people and on-line learning. Participants were asked to respond to a single question/statement and their replies were sent only to the researchers. After receiving all replies, participant names and email addresses were removed and replaced by nicknames nominated by the participants. The nine anonymous responses were then consolidated into one lengthy email and sent to each of the participants. They were invited to comment on the replies of others or add more to their own reply, if they wished. The composite responses and additional replies were then used to help structure a new question and the process repeated for a total of eleven questions.

The questions/statements were:

1. Tell us something about yourself and how you came to the Internet.
2. What are the strengths and weaknesses of online learning? It would be helpful if you specifically focus at least some of your comments on u3aOnline, including the all-important personal element.
3. Personal history: What life events or personal qualities might have led you to take up computing and the Internet? (Note we are interested in your perception of self. We are not talking about technology and machines.)

4. What changes has ageing made to the way you work with information and ideas compared with how you used to work with information and ideas?
5. What effect is the Internet in general having on you with respect to the following:
Time management
Daily routine
Personal life
Character
Social (how has this affected your relationship with other people? Has your circle of real friends changed?)
6. What are you becoming with your interest in learning via the Internet? Where are you going with all this?

Following a break of several months for text analysis the following five questions were sent to participants.

7. We notice that some members of the group appear to be in good physical health while others are managing various diseases/disabilities. What are you doing to manage your health (whether it is good or otherwise) and how have you attempted to maximise good health in the past and in the present?
8. We notice that people are differently situated with respect to their group of close friends and acquaintances. Could we ask you to comment on your current network of friends, whether they are online or otherwise.
9. Has participation in email and other Internet activities reduced any feelings of isolation or loneliness you may have experienced? If so can you tell me how?
10. Can you please list your hobbies and interests, and tell me whether or not they influenced the courses you took.
11. We think it likely that older people who ventured into learning in cyberspace before the medium was well known by the wider ageing population, must have an innate sense of curiosity and/or sense of adventure and/or are "risk takers". Please think about your entire life and describe what family or environmental circumstances may have shaped your willingness to venture into cyberspace.

As well as providing information for the following mini biographies the many pages of participant data have provided rich material for formal text analysis. Preliminary information about these findings, as well as a more complete description of the method can be found in the paper listed on this site entitled

Antecedents to Internet learning: Illuminating the characteristics of older online learners.

We thank the Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Brisbane for providing the funding for this study.

Ginger's Story

Nickname: Ginger

Location: Melbourne, Australia

Age: Late 50's

Gender: Female

“There are many days when pain stops me from doing much at all, and if I had to travel to attend a class then I would not be able to do it.”

Ginger went back to adult education in order to gain the qualifications she was unable to access due to her family's economic situation earlier in her life. Her plans were abruptly cut short, when operations to improve the osteoarthritis she had in her spine since she was young left her with Chronic Regional Pain Syndrome. She was forced to drop both work and study as her pain level became unbearable. Ginger has been able to regain some of her lost opportunities by studying online. “Before belonging to U3A Online I felt very isolated from the rest of the world. I was not lonely as such as I had my husband at home all the time as he ran his business from there.”

“Before I became ill I had been attending a TAFE [Technical and Further Education] College studying Community Development on a part-time basis and was really enjoying it. I enjoyed the stimulation of the other students who were mostly younger than me... Then suddenly I was cut off from all this and I experienced a really low period. I missed the companionship of others with the same interests. I was unable to spend time at the library and I knew I would not be able to participate in a classroom situation again as pain stopped me from sitting/standing in one position for long periods. My medication made me very tired and I found that I could not concentrate

for any length of time. I could only do things at my own pace, and that is not on when you are doing formal studies and there are deadlines to meet... It was at this time that I found U3A Online courses to be of great benefit to me. I felt part of the community again, I was now able to study things that interested me. I enjoyed the interaction with other people who for some reason or other, like me, were isolated from the community at large. Most importantly of all, I could do this at my own pace. I could still be part of a study group without the pressure of time constraint. My feelings of isolation were far less thanks to U3A... I felt part of society again.”

Ginger is very familiar with computers as a result of assisting her husband, who is totally blind, and uses them for business. With each software upgrade she helps him learn how to find his way around the new system. He uses a speech synthesizer and OCR software. “I wanted to be of help to my husband so it wasn’t a chore for me to learn things about the computer, in fact, I have always found it interesting... I thank my husband for encouraging me to develop my own interests. The fact that he does not allow his disability to stop him from learning or getting on with life has been a great inspiration for me. When I became physically unable to work at a fairly young age I could have easily just given in as I loved my job, my lifestyle and here I was unable to do the things I used to do.”

E-mail gives Ginger a priceless link to the outside world. As well as staying in touch with ‘cyber friends,’ she is also in regular contact with a long-standing friend in New Zealand who she has known since early adulthood. “It has meant a lot to both of us as we go back a long way, and have been through many things that only the two of us can share. At first we wrote regularly, once a week at least, whereas now it is

usually around every three weeks or so, but that is fine as by that time we usually have plenty to tell each other... I do not get to meet up with many of my friends like I used to, but having access to e-mail helps me to keep in constant contact... For many isolated people e-mail and the Internet is their umbilical cord to the rest of the world, and I think this describes it very well... It is great to get online and find lots of messages awaiting you, it certainly stops you from feeling lonely and isolated.”

“When I first became ‘connected’ I spent many hours each week sitting at my computer totally engrossed in finding new sites, joining various groups of people with same interests... I now find that I only sit at my computer a couple of times a week... I do believe that having a computer and using the Internet etc. has given me a lot of confidence. I am able to join in on discussions on various things to do with this, and I really feel that I would have missed out on a lot had I not taken time to learn.”

“I hope I have encouraged others to take up using the computer and the Internet as a means of learning. I have found that when an older person tackles something new such as learning about a computer or playing the piano or painting, they take it on with relish. They are doing it for themselves and not because someone has told them they have to do it, and it is not a chore, it is exciting and gives one a sense of achievement. I will continue to use my computer and keep on learning as long as I am able, and hopefully U3A Online and other similar projects will be with us for a long time.”

Leon's story

Nickname: Leon

Location: Brisbane, Australia

Age: 73

Gender: Male

“I need not elaborate on the many uses of a good computer. I can safely say that a computer is such a basic tool in this present generation. I can even go further by saying that I am willing to sacrifice other amenities provided I have a well functioning computer. The acquisition of new information and new ideas based on a new change in my life perspective is very significant.”

Leon is a seventy-three year old Philippino man who has immigrated to Australia. He has worked as a Government Official in the Philippines, and as a Philippino community representative in Darwin. He still maintains a keen interest in current civic and parliamentary issues. He has always had an interest in computer technology. “I think it has been more an obsession on my part to be current on computer technology, and cyberspace these days. I guess it is part of my nature. I have always been a follower of science and technology, even during my younger days. When circumstances made themselves available to me, I immediately jumped on the various opportunities... For about three years prior to 1995 it had been my obsession to own a computer. I am a wide reader and I have been reading all these wonderful things that a computer can do... I even envisioned what a computer could do for me in my extreme advanced age when I will be confined mostly at home. I cannot imagine myself, that in extreme old age I would just face the four walls in the house... my aim is really to be completely computer literate.”

Leon lives with his wife who is also restricted by health problems. Leon himself suffers from heart disease, diabetes and suffered a stroke in 1999. "I have difficulty walking. To maintain mental alertness and to keep an active mind I decided to go online – join courses, correspond with e-mails frequently and surf... Cyberspace has always been my curiosity, even during the early stages of the new technology. It is now part of my life!... With the other projects that I have with the Internet, I have definitely become addicted. In a short span of seven years, since I acquired a P.C., this has been changing my lifestyle and there is more to come.

Currently Leon is doing a course online through Princeton University on the 'Genesis of War.' He has worked through the U3A Online Autobiography and Journaling Course, which he is utilising to enable him to complete what he calls 'Project Memoirs.' "Under a situation where my wife and I are virtually living alone I have become more spiritual. There is now a growing obsession on my part to leave some tangible legacy to my children and grandchildren when we are gone. I want to break a tradition where my parents used to tell us only verbally about events and people. And we, as younger people then, were not so interested and as a result important family data were lost. This time I would like to have some proper documentation to be left behind for future reference by those coming after us... I took a big interest in the U3A course in Autobiography. I am now effectively applying the various techniques derived from that online course."

Not only is Leon working on this project, but he has also engaged the interest and assistance of his four siblings. The five members of the family live in five different countries, so e-mail has become an indispensable vehicle for carrying out the project.

“The responses/reactions from emailing are so spontaneous that we are able to carry on the momentum and interest. This has introduced a new dimension in my personal life... I have also developed a closer bond with my siblings through the use of the Internet... The initial target is our childhood days but this will branch out later on.”

E-mail has also provided Leon with cherished contact with previous colleagues who are scattered all over the world. “First I completed an autobiography course. Then I followed up with the completion of a 150-page autobiography. Suddenly I became so nostalgic about events in my younger years. I got in touch with the only address I have in my possession – a former office staff member. After awhile we now have an informal group called the IUS Global Reach - a reunion of my former staff twenty-five to thirty years ago. We are now in the process of e-mailing each other... Moreover, any feelings of isolation or loneliness are automatically erased.”

“There are other activities involved in the use of the computer but without being connected to the Internet. This concept of online courses is a blessing or bonanza to the family. In spite of some disadvantages, we have no option but to stay at home most of the time. My wife and I are pensioners and we are sickly. I can achieve a goal of having an active mind (which is health to the body) if I have ready access to the computer and Internet right at home. I definitely will be involved in more online courses in years to come.”

Marmar's Story

Nickname: Marmar

Location: Small rural town with population of 400, Australia

Age: 60's

Gender: Female

"I came to the Internet through a love of and respect for personal computers... I have since given a lot of my time to helping older people on to computers and onto the net, but I cannot say that it has been easy. Older people have very specific learning difficulties, sometimes magnified by the changes that advancing ageing brings. It would be good to know more about how the older person learns in order to ensure the most benefits and the quickest way of making them proficient on computers. Subsequently I have been proud to join U3A Online... Unless we move quickly, my generation of over sixties are going to miss out on the wonders of the net."

Marmar is isolated both geographically and by her deafness. Now in her sixties, she has worked as an anthropologist, and still undertakes formal research projects. Marmar lives in a small town with a population of four hundred people, three hours drive away from the nearest major centre. The Internet is an essential component of her day-to-day life. It enables Marmar to communicate with people she wouldn't be able to connect with any other way. "The Internet has enriched my life immeasurably... Without the Internet I would be bereft of contacts in this very isolated area where I live. With it I can contribute to the life of the community here, and I can keep in touch with family, colleagues and friends elsewhere... I interact more online than in everyday life, because being hard of hearing does not matter in an email message or a chat room."

As she was already an experienced computer user, Marmar's niece suggested she try the Internet because she'd like it. Marmar experimented with the Internet through the Hobart library, read up on it and then went online from her home. "I felt powerful! All this through my telephone line and I was amazed. I was even more so as time went by and I discovered the Virtual University. I did a few online courses with them on mastering the Internet and then Genealogy courses with a wonderful teacher. Through this I discovered mailing lists and chat rooms. Heady stuff indeed... For me engaging with computers and the Internet is a voyage of continuing wonder. We have not yet seen where they can take us, and I want to be there all the way."

Marmar uses the Internet daily and her computer is considered an indispensable tool for everyday life. On retiring she joined seniors groups and found their focus did not match her needs. "I had not seen any era called 'retirement' but rather I live in a period I think of as the third major phase of my life. I have not retired from life; I am reinventing, renewing, and refurbishing it. I see it as an opportunity to straighten out many things, to stop aiming for the high spots and to enjoy having 'arrived' at certain destinations – motherhood, professional writer, photographer and so on... It is time to invent new places for older people to be and not to accept stereotypes which banish us to an early grave or washing up roster! In some desperation I asked myself, 'Where are all the people I want to talk to?' and I discovered to my continuing delight that they are online... Being online daily provides the social and intellectual stimulation and the information I need to enliven the third phase of my life."

Marmar is committed to a healthy lifestyle that includes nutritious food, adequate sleep and regular walks. She also focuses on building her spirit by addressing any challenges and stresses she faces, and seeking meaning in these. Even though her hearing impairment presents obstacles for her, she has not allowed it to immobilise her or cut back her productivity. Marmar has found that ageing hasn't made a difference in the way she processes information, rather the problems come from external sources such as librarians who "...may not take me seriously when they see the grey hair. This is a real issue (whether it is my misperception or theirs). I refer to the perception that 'real' research is the province of younger people only, for older people are 'past it,' 'not serious' or not in earnest. Retirement means backing off from the serious stuff doesn't it? I resist this attitude wherever I find it and sometimes it is within me. More than this, the world expects the changes of ageing to be only negative. Older people take on these attitudes too. How wrong can we be? Ageing has many pluses, not least the way one works with ideas and information. As an older researcher I am very familiar with my field, or to put that another way I am sure of what I know. And equally sure of what I do not know... I am more discerning in assessing data. I think more clearly and am certainly more succinct in my writing. Add to that the benefits of working with personal computers and the Internet and older thinkers and researchers are a force to be reckoned with."

As for Marmar's future goals, they are not clear. "What next? I don't know but I am sure my computer and the Internet will be involved. Long may it last."

MM's Story

Nickname: MM

Location: Adelaide, Australia

Age: 72

Gender: Female

"I don't think I will live long enough to learn about all the interesting things in this world."

Born in Canada, MM came to Australia when she was first married and now widowed, lives in Adelaide. As a mature age student, MM went to University and completed a Doctorate in Ancient Greek. She is also a classical pianist, and currently is working through a Jewish Studies course through Sydney University. The Open Learning program has also provided MM with opportunities to undertake courses such as ancient and Jewish history, archaeology, astronomy and art history. MM has found that online learning now suits her needs. "I myself enjoy the opportunity to study at any time and in my own time... I don't drive much except for the essentials such as shopping and to the library... I don't like driving at night (or trying to find a parking place) when places such as the W.E.A. have classes. Also, as I am a pensioner, most of these courses are too expensive. I also have a tendency to resist the necessity to turn up at the same prescribed time and place every week."

MM began to use the computer for practical reasons. "I first attended University as a mature age student and spent my first year writing essays by hand – although I had earned a living as a good typist I didn't have a fast electric typewriter.... Instead of an expensive typewriter I bought a computer – something which turned out to be not too

satisfactory but it was good for learning on... I got a number of Shareware programs, some good others not so good, did a lot of experimenting and got quite good with DOS. After this I progressed to better and more expensive machines and printers.”

“When visiting relatives in Canada in 1998 they were anxious to give me their e-mail addresses and explain the system to me. So when I returned home and found I had to upgrade again, I got the next computer complete with modem etc... and started e-mailing relatives. I also had become quite curious about the web as I read the newspapers thoroughly and was accumulating all this information about something I knew nothing about – like waving a red rag at the bull. I had to know what everyone was talking about. All of this was probably a result of living by myself. My husband died over twenty-five years ago and my children have long since left home to set up for themselves. So I have the freedom to get interested in all sorts of activities which appeal to me and I seem to have a great deal of curiosity about a lot of things in the world... I guess being familiar with the Internet etc. makes me feel as if I am keeping up with the world in at least one way.”

MM uses Netbank to pay bills. She limits her use of e-mail because she sees it as being impersonal. “I personally have always preferred information and instruction which came by way of written material and have no trouble comprehending this unless it is a scientific or similar subject which may need clarification by way of question and answer... Thus I still use books and now also use Internet material which I print into hard copy... I do have access to a pretty good library... I feel now I am able to research subjects which interest me, in order to decide if I wish to continue study, which I probably do in the more traditional manner i.e. books,

lectures, etc. I am able to get answers (sometimes!) to more specific questions, that is, search for a particular word/topic. I find myself becoming more knowledgeable in different areas.”

I don't actually know where I am going with the Internet, but I am trying to keep up somewhat with modern technology so I can appear interested when there is a discussion, even join in. I know quite a few older people who are quite uninterested and don't intend to learn. I don't want to join them (at least not yet) in the last Century.”

Painter's story

Nickname: Painter

Location: United Kingdom

Age: Late 60's

Gender: Female

"It was my experience of working in a recently Communist Eastern Europe that made me realise how much I had taken access to information for granted. In a society where no one tells anybody anything, information is something to be frightened of... The effect of the Internet and e-mail on my relationships with people I was working with there cannot be over-estimated."

As an English teacher and School Librarian, Painter worked in a number of locations worldwide including the United Kingdom, Hong Kong, Ukraine and Europe. The use of computers has been woven through her work and personal life, and the Internet now enables her to remain in contact with previous colleagues, as well as being an essential tool in the acquisition of information for her personal interests. "The process of increasing experience of life and advancing technology cannot in my mind be separated. I know that I am fortunate in the second half of my sixties to be very fit physically, to be economically independent and to be without serious family constraints. However, I am very grateful not to have to make journeys to the nearby town to visit the library as the only source of reference. The Internet enables me to explore ideas from home and to communicate at a much lower cost with a worldwide circle of friends and correspondents."

From working overseas, Painter is all too familiar with the frustrations of trying to get letters to and from England. Some countries even required forms to be filled out in triplicate before a letter could be sent, and delivery times made communication frustrating and disjointed. "E-mail and the Internet have altered my feelings considerably of where I stand in the world. I have many friendships which I am fairly sure would not have survived the vagaries of third world postage systems, but having email contacts has allowed them to develop. This makes me feel much nearer to people in Brazil, Ukraine, Israel, New Zealand, Australia, America, Canada et al. It's so easy to have a 'chat' and to get an immediate reply. The contacts are relaxed and much more like a conversation than a written letter... If I think of something late at night or very early in the morning when it would be inappropriate to telephone, I can send an email."

Painter has used computers in her work since the mid 1980's. She came into contact with U3A Online because of a recommendation from local U3A group, and studied the Botany for Knowledge and Enjoyment course. This course was chosen to accompany her interest in botanical painting, a hobby she had waited until retirement to pursue. "Freedom in retirement to follow my interests means I now need more information over a wider range of subjects. This is a chicken and egg situation. Is my need for more the result of more being available, or is greater accessibility creating the demand? It is also a product of my approach to life being wide rather than deep... I am not a person who needs to feel at the cutting edge of technology as it advances, and work on the principle that 'if it aint broke, don't fix it...' I think I am becoming very dependent on my computer for many different functions, mainly communication and

information... We now book travel tickets, buy books and search for information on all sorts of topics from acupuncture to family trees for the rest of the family. But I am still not very sure what goes on 'under the bonnet.' I still feel very computer illiterate when things don't go according to plan, but am learning to play around, and if it crashes just start again!"

Painter has a diverse range of interests including bell ringing, herbal medicines, food and cooking, botany, wildlife, bird watching and 'living lightly.' "So what am I doing via the Internet? I do explore web sites in which I am interested... I follow links to other web sites and have found sources of painting equipment and other consumables which I didn't know about. I have explored web sites about my husband's illness and found out a lot of things which can be done to help him and to improve my own understanding of what is going on. I have searched various sites for information to help my grandchildren with their homework. I suppose I am becoming more aware of the Internet as a source of information and where I would previously have gone to an Encyclopaedia I often now think first of the Internet... I tend to seek solutions to problems by myself. This is not always a good thing. Maybe I would be better advised to ask for help sometimes from 'experts.' However the Internet has proved to be a wonderful source of information and a means to bypass the 'experts' as my instincts suggest. I think this may be one reason why it appealed to me and why I put some time, effort and money into getting myself online."

"Where am I going with all this?... I shall continue to look for opportunities in all mediums/media to extend my knowledge, but I no longer need qualifications and can

afford to dabble in a variety of areas of interest. I think the Internet is an ideal medium for this sort of approach and with an ageing population could be well used in this way. I think my computer is becoming a tool which I use just as I use my telephone and my car to get me where I want to go and can provide me with the information that I need. Where I want to go can be any area of learning and the information I need will change as my lifestyle changes with age and commitments. I suppose I am becoming a 'user' with a very little understanding of what goes on 'under the bonnet,' but determined to somehow find enough fuel to keep going for awhile longer."

Pip's story

Nickname: Pip
Location: Adelaide, Australia
Age: 77
Gender: Female

"I'll go as far as to say that being totally absorbed in my most recent online course has saved my sanity this year."

Pip, a retired Primary School Headmistress, faces many challenges. She assists in the care of her granddaughter who uses a wheelchair, while battling to live with profound hearing loss and intrusive treatments for leukaemia, diabetes and acute anaemia. Despite this, Pip maintains a positive attitude. "I prefer to dwell on what I have going for me rather than what might be seen to be wrong with me... Coming to terms with changing states or physical and/or emotional conditions has presented me with challenges, exposed weaknesses and uncovered strengths, particularly a determination I had been slow to recognise."

Pip was originally introduced to computer use in 1980. "I was fifty-eight years old when I won a Class A position as Principal of a challenging Junior Primary School... I had a reputation for being innovative and passionate about education and I wanted to do all I could to encourage the school community to develop a life long love of learning. It was clear that this would mean embracing technology. The problem was, I was scared stiff of anything technical. The solution was taken out of my hands when

the Department [of Education] let it be known that it was considering using computers in administration and schools... Bravely I bought a computer and a dot matrix printer from a local supplier and introduced computers into the school. By the time I retired, seven years later, all the children had access to computers."

The same friend who had introduced Pip to computers also paved the way for Pip going online. "This opened a new world – although at the time I didn't see much point in being on the net myself and using e-mail. None of my relatives in England and few friends in Australia had computers. However in 1998 I bought a new computer and struggled to cope with the Internet. It wasn't long before my family in England bought or used community computers and connected to the Internet. Now it's hard for me to imagine a life without being able to find information on web sites and to send and receive frequent e-mails from friends in Australia, my family in England and a granddaughter in Canada."

Pip joined U3A Online when it was in its pilot stage, after responding to a letter in the Adelaide Advertiser. Since then she has worked through almost all courses available, which she has also been able to share with her husband. "He is enjoying more learning than he has in his whole life... Online learning has helped develop my keyboard and computer skills and has been instrumental in giving me intellectual challenges when I most needed them... My hearing loss, now severe, has meant that I no longer participate in seminars or conferences and group discussions, but rely instead on the written word, on the net or from books/magazines etc. In my seventies I am as eager, if not more so, to discover new ideas and sources of information than

at any time in my life - not to pass exams or earn an income, just for the pure love of learning."

Recently Pip lost a close friend to liver and spinal cancer after giving her a great deal of practical and emotional support. "As demanding in time and energy as this support was, I found relaxation and stimulation on the Internet and particularly through U3A Online courses.' 'When I am on the net time has no meaning. I skip through the absolutely essential every day tasks and spend hours in rapt discovery. For a time I am totally self-indulgent and it feels good! I look forward to receiving emails from other course members; people I've never met and I value their friendship... I have enjoyed (and am still enjoying) the personal contacts I have made through U3A courses."

Originally seeing e-mail as impersonal, Pip's view has been changed by her experience. "As for e-mails being impersonal, all I can say is mine flow with love and humour... A wonderful way to keep in touch... I have many friends but few of them are what I call close friends, friends with whom I can share ideas, interests, trust and confidences. One such friend lives in England. We've never met face to face. I got to know her when we were both doing the U3A Online Italian Renaissance course. We found we had much in common in backgrounds, a love of reading and word play, the same sense of humour, similar interests. Her husband died of leukaemia and she understands the challenges I face. We are living doppelgangers, sharing day-to-day details of our lives by e-mail several times a week. Such mutual support and loving friendship is rare; we both value it immensely. Other 'cyberspace' friends send me

encouraging e-mail messages and two of them who live in Adelaide offer practical support should I need it. I've never met them and it's been surprising that we are so comfortable in sharing our thoughts and beliefs and support for each other. Its as though cyberspace has replaced the comforting natter over a backyard fence."

"For the last few weeks my old computer and server have not been seeing eye to eye with connections. My frustration and sense of loss/isolation made me aware that accessing the net for e-mails or information has become a vital part of my life. Where am I going with all this? I have been a tutor for two courses and am about to tutor for a third; and have been a member of a pilot course. Continuing study for my own pleasure and with U3A is a must. I look forward to many more enjoyable hours of learning and communicating."

RT's Story

Nickname: RT

Location: Rural New Zealand

Age: 60's

Gender: Male

"I do try to keep up with the 'Brave New World' (Huxley), but at a slower pace than once was my pattern. But underneath it all is a happy person. I enjoy my discoveries, and my own pace. One of the biggest contributions to my present and my future has been, and will no doubt remain, the Internet. Almost instant communication with family, friends and colleagues is a tremendous asset. I guess that somehow all this is stopping me from becoming an isolated old, sad relic."

RT is a retired High School Guidance Counsellor living in rural New Zealand. He has worked with computers from the earliest models. The High School he worked at, though rural, pioneered a computer program for the students. "I followed my thirteen year old son (I was in my mid forties) into the mysteries of the TRS80, then the Apple packages, and quite some time later the IBM suite." RT went online as soon as the New Zealand telecommunications system was viable to electronic data transmission. "I do have an innate sense of curiosity. I am an avid reader of articles and books on science, science fiction and popular novels. I like tinkering with household gadgets, repairing or building electronic toys and enjoying mathematics (which I now tutor in retirement.)" RT's areas of interest include physics, astronomy, geology, psychology, liberal theology, computing, aviation and electronics.

RT's use of the Internet only accounts for a small portion of his overall computer use. He and his wife are actively involved in hobby, community and social activities. RT does not use the Internet as a tool for social interaction as due to these other interests, he has insufficient time and need. However, he does use electronic communication extensively for community work. "In retirement my services seem to be in great demand by clubs and committees. I do newsletters, publicity brochures, bookkeeping and act as the contact agent for seven different clubs and committees on which my wife or I are active members... When I was full time employed I would use the computer, and perhaps less so the Internet, at work for aspects of my work... Now with no need to 'go to work' I have turned my home into my office, and at the usual start of work time (8:00am) I turn on the computer and it does not go off until after 11:00pm at night... I am putting more and more time into the use of tools like Search Engines and daily news/weather, marketing and the download of card type games, screen saver graphics and other 'fun' items. The discovery of U3A was one such find."

To date RT has enjoyed the Antarctica, Astronomy and Continents On The Move courses he has studied through U3A Online. He prints all his course notes, and over time has followed up the links provided in the course to new information that has further aroused his interest in the topic and related areas. "The only other source of possible study material is at the local library. But this is not easy to use when the books are not up to date, nor technical... So the strength is that U3A courses online are current, mostly up to date and full of references that are pre-selected for me on the topic I am studying. Another positive aspect is that the courses are so full that I

need never feel I have learned it all. I can, even months later, come back to a lesson – look up a new set of side references and start a fresh aspect of the topic.”

Since retiring in 2001 RT and his wife have traveled widely. “The point of interest is that in each of these trips I have used the Internet extensively, through cyber cafe links, to maintain communication with friends and family. I have also used these events to help establish my "new" hobby of digital photography on the computer.”

Rev's story

Nickname: Rev
Location: Sydney, Australia
Age: 70
Gender: Male

“So what has shaped my willingness to venture into cyberspace? An openness to new ideas, a willingness to take risks and a mind which will not accept that it knows all there is to know, that's worth knowing.”

Rev is a seventy-year-old retired Uniting Church Minister from western Sydney. He started to use computers after they had been introduced to him as a time saving device, and found them a useful record-keeping tool. The immeasurable knowledge available on the Internet later captured his attention and he went online. Rev has a “go with the flow” attitude derived from his childhood experiences in moving from England to Malaya as a part of his father's army career. The consequence of these early experiences was that he developed “a healthy scepticism about the so-called advantages of being English; an openness to other people's culture and religion and a willingness to say, ‘let's give it a go,’ when asked to do something strange or different.”

Retirement has given Rev the opportunity to read and study the subject matter that interests him. “I can now use the computer for pleasure and explore the world of literature and writing, or music (especially opera) and art; of sitting quietly and enjoying the warmth of the sun and the sounds of the birds.” His pastimes include classical music, jazz, art and history. These interests have influenced which courses

he has taken through the University of the Third Age Online, such as The Romans and The History of the English Language. However, Rev has also found that visiting the recommended web sites from his courses has evoked his curiosity and led to him “breaking out of my own area of expertise.” Rev has since taken up new subjects to explore and research. Rev says, “what really interested me was a mind open to new knowledge and the opportunity to learn.”

Rev found U3A Online when surfing the Internet. A friend had told him about the University of the Third Age programme. The greatest drawback to learning online for Rev is its isolation, which he is wary of. To avoid the isolation risk he utilises strategies such as discussing what he is doing and has discovered with his wife. Rev has undertaken voluntary work at the Sydney Olympics and the Sydney Masonic Centre in order to ensure he doesn't become too segregated from social contact and also continues to carry out occasional church work. The greatest challenge Rev experiences with online communication is not being able to process the non-verbal aspects of face to face communication with others, such as facial expression and tone of voice. “I tend to think about net friends in the same terms as pen pals. People you keep in contact with but whom you do not really know.” Rev questions whether or not you can have a tangible friendship with a pen pal, though he does believe that even casual e-mail and message board communication has assisted in reducing feelings of disconnection and loneliness he's experienced when studying by himself. He has found that the speed of e-mail communication plays a part in minimising feelings of superficiality. However, Rev sometimes sees the anonymity of

the Internet as a bonus. "This means that some people who might not comment in a live group may be encouraged to actively participate without embarrassment.

In his final year of primary school in England, a geography teacher introduced Rev to stamp collecting. This involved researching the history of the stamps, which led to a fondness for reference books. "Over the years I have come to appreciate more and more that information is the key to most enterprises. I soon discovered that it is impossible to know all there is to know about one subject. That discovery could have turned me off continuing education, but it didn't... To know where to find it? That was the key, knowing where and how to retrieve the information you needed... So I was ready when the Internet came online. One of the problems now, however, is that there is so much information out there it takes time and effort to sort out the wheat from the chaff... I am much more selective in what ideas I am prepared to take on board." Rev also recognises there is no guarantee of the authenticity of the information he has found.

Rev has no specific plans for what he wants to accomplish through his explorations online. "I spend a lot of time at the keyboard 'playing on my computer' as my wife claims... What am I becoming with my interest in learning via the Internet? More contented, more relaxed... Where am I going with all this? I don't know, but I am enjoying myself on the way." Rev and his wife have a commitment to staying physically and mentally agile, walking every morning and engaging in mentally stimulating activities such as Target and cryptic crosswords. Recently they also enjoyed a Sydney Harbour Bridge climb with friends. Rev joined U3A Online

specifically to keep his mind active. "Each unit I have undertaken has pointed me in so many different directions... They have also brought me into virtual contact with a whole range of different people so I now have contacts across the globe and literally in my own suburb... As one gets older and health deteriorates, the world starts to shrink around you... In retirement I don't travel as much... and contacts are dropping off. Can cyber friends replace those contacts? To some extent, yes."

Kiwi's story

Kiwi is ill and to date we have been unable to get her permission to publish her story