



Helping Hand
AGED CARE

Social Networking for Older People using Technology

Helping
South Australians

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May 2010



Background

- Alone in a Crowd – ARC Linkage Research Project
 - Temporal Loneliness
 - Technology to alleviate loneliness?
- Lack of research related to social networking
- Why Technology/Social Networking Sites (SNS)?
 - Did the internet possess the potential for older people to reach out to a broader group?
 - Could the use of technology act as a support to programs which run in the traditional 9am-5pm time frame.
- Run over 3 month period – did this restrict our capacity?

Aim of the project

- The aim of the project is to work **collaboratively** with older people living in the community to explore whether the use of a social networking site for older persons reduces temporal loneliness. Specifically:
 - Work with older people **one-on-one in their home** to develop their skills
 - Enable older people to communicate at **specific times** of the day
 - Assess if social networking sites **increase social interaction** and **improve overall wellbeing**
 - Consider if the outcomes has **broader implications** for aged care
 - To assess the possible **sustainable** potential of this project



Method

Steering Group was carefully considered, they had to be decision makers.

Recruitment needed to be efficient and effective

- ‘Towards Community Inclusion Program’
- 6 clients initially recruited



Logistics

- Choosing a social networking site
- Sourcing computers
- Linking to the internet

Method

Use of ***Project Officers***, they needed to feel comfortable supporting clients in their homes, be IT savvy, including social networking and the internet



Evaluation methods

- Continuous process
- Mix of qualitative and quantitative methods
- Journals kept by Project Officers about sessions
- Baseline questionnaires
- Weekly logs recorded by participants
- In depth semi-structured interviews (pre and post)

What did we find?

- All increased their internet useage both by hours each day and number of times during week
- No real change in times of day computer used
- All used internet for a range of activities
 - » Horseracing
 - » Research family history
 - » Chatting to family
 - » “Surfing the net”

- 4 major themes



Themes

(1) Participants Experience of Loneliness

“That (loneliness) the worst enemy. I have always said to people I won’t die of starvation but I might die of loneliness”



“I can be lonely in a crowd.....I felt like I was an island and everything was swimming past me and I couldn’t do anything”

Themes

(2) Technology as an Enabler-Opening the Door

Participants responded positively to the project and stated that their loneliness was reduced.

“I like it all the time but night time is a time when you do feel particularly lonely and when you get on that you don't feel lonely. It takes your mind off everything and that's where it's good.”



Themes

(3) Connectivity

Increased sense of connectivity experienced with the outside world when using the social networking website.

“It’s just having someone to talk to, to chat too. Otherwise I am here all by myself. It’s nice to get to chat.”

“What have I learnt? I have learnt that I am not alone.”



Themes

4) Providing a Supportive Environment-Learning the Skills

The educative process which encouraged mutual learning and an increased sense of self-empowerment. It was also found that the strategy involved was one of the key successes to the project.



“The nature of this personalised program is the only way to do it. You could have run it in a class situation but I don’t think it would work in a way... Children and school children can do it as a class thing, they are younger and they pick it up quicker. But at this stage a one-to-one basis is the best.”



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Exemplar vignette

- Ms M
 - 68 year old woman who lives on her own
 - Active during the day in a volunteer role
 - However, Ms M found that she would get lonely during the:
 - “...evenings. Because during the day I can just get in the car and go for a drive. Even now I get these flutters in the stomach. If I go out or do something it goes.”
 - Never used the internet prior to this experience but had used a computer

- Thrived throughout the project and in fact went from an internet use of 0 to 20 hours per week.
- Ms M was asked about her experience and made the following comments:

“I’m really enjoying it... The website is connecting me with new people and the email is allowing me to keep in contact with old friends and family.”



Ms M stated that as a result she gained:

“Friendship. Friendship and you know if I wake up in the morning at 3 o’clock, I get on there. I was on there this morning, I couldn’t sleep and there are people in England who I speak to.”

On completion of the project Ms M had gained 32 new friends through the About My Age SNS.

And that now she was: “...more outgoing, I feel less lonely, and I just enjoy it.”



- Following the end of the pilot Ms M :
 - Found an internet provider that is cheap for pensioners.
 - Set up the internet herself, as a result of newly learnt skills and today continues to use her computer daily.
 - Sought extra help through a tutor and continues to see her on a regular basis.
 - Still utilising the About My Age website and also her email
 - Believes she has a new sense of confidence, a new outlook on life, increased happiness, a new skill set and a new large group of friends that she is in constant contact with.



Lessons Learned

- The small number of participants meant that the project was manageable
- One-on-one computer training and ongoing support achieved sustainability for participants
- Need to account for individual physical and mental disabilities that may pre-exist
- Some participants expressed indifferent reactions to the social networking site itself, eg inconsistent responses from other site members.
- The project was resource intensive, need to explore other options



Conclusion

- Utilisation of a social networking site has the potential to reduce loneliness, specifically temporal and connectedness
- Older People absolutely benefit from 1 on 1 training and support
- The use of technology and SNS is not intended to be a replacement to other programs/activities but rather should complement them



Addendum

- Extraordinary interest in this project
 - ABC interviews over Christmas break
 - Written up in major newspapers including overseas
- 40 000 hits to 'About my Age'
- Currently has 1000's of new members with steady increase

