

## **The U3A paradigm: Past, present and (possible) future**

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### **How did U3A come about?**

In his book *A Fresh Map of Life*, Laslett (1989) wrote about the comparatively recent demographic and sociological changes which led to the historically unprecedented phenomenon of the Third Age. Before the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century adults spent virtually all their lives in their Second Age, working and caring for family. Then for usually a brief time they defaulted to their Fourth Age, a period of dependency and decrepitude prior to death.

A fundamental change in this centuries-old pattern began to emerge in many countries, from around the 1950s. Then, for the first time in history, a combination of compulsory retirement, pensions and increased longevity resulted in the great majority of older people in industrialized countries spending many healthy, active, and potentially self-fulfilling years in their Third Age.

An appropriate political climate for the evolution of an idea like U3A was established in France in 1968 when legislation was passed requiring universities to provide more community education. In 1973 a highly rated gerontology course, run by Toulouse University of Social Sciences exclusively for local retired people, led to the formation of the first U3A. The U3A was open to anyone over retirement age; no qualifications or examinations were required or offered, and fees were kept to a minimum. By 1975 the idea had spread to other French universities as well as to universities in Belgium, Switzerland, Poland, Italy, Spain and across the Atlantic to Sherbrooke in Quebec and San Diego in California. AIUTA, the international association of U3As was formed in the same year and, by 1981, more than 170 member institutions belonged.

Different U3A approaches began to develop by the late 1970s, even within France, including several which were a direct creation of local government and not connected with a university. The original focus on older people by universities also began to broaden to include other educationally disadvantaged groups. In many places the programs were advertised for early retirees, housewives, the unemployed and those with disabilities. Some U3As were renamed to reflect the changing emphasis, for example, University of Leisure Time, and Inter-Age University.

Courses varied widely in content, style of presentation and format. In general they exhibited a mixture of open lectures, negotiated access to established university courses, contracted courses, study groups, workshops, excursions and physical health programs. Content was mainly in the humanities and arts. Funding also varied considerably. Some U3As were largely university funded; some were funded by a combination of fees, donations, and direct financial subsidy from the local township; and some were mainly member-funded on a sliding scale, depending on participants' assets.

U3A underwent a substantial change when it reached Cambridge in 1981. Rather than relying on university good will the founders of the British model adopted an approach in which there was to be no distinction between the teachers and the taught (Laslett, 1989).

Members would be the teachers as well as the learners and, where possible, members should engage in research activities. The "self-help" ideal was based on the knowledge that experts of every kind retire, thus, there should be no need for older learners to have to rely on paid or unpaid Second Age teachers. Laslett provided a substantial rationale for this approach.

The self-help approach has been highly successful in Britain as well as in other countries like Australia and New Zealand. Some of the strengths of the approach include: minimal membership fees; accessible classes run in community halls, libraries, private homes, schools, and so forth; flexible timetables and negotiable curriculum and teaching styles; wide course variety ranging from the highly academic to arts, crafts and physical activity; no academic constraints such as entrance requirements or examinations; and, the opportunity to mix with alert like-minded people who enjoy doing new things. Each U3A is independent and is run by a democratically elected management committee of members (Swindell&Thompson, 1995).

U3A in Australia began in Victoria in 1984 with the U3A City of Melbourne being the first to offer courses. U3A Hawthorn was formed in the same year and in the following year several other groups started in Victoria. Significantly, the nucleus of the highly successful U3A Network Victoria was formed in 1985 as leaders there started with the idea that cooperation and networking would achieve more for the fledgling U3A movement than "going it alone". How right they were: by 2007 eighty-one U3As belonged to the network and these groups were providing a wide range of courses and activities, some of them shared, for some 21,000 members.

Without formal or financial support from any organisation the U3A idea quickly spread throughout Australia. For the most part, groups of local enthusiasts took the lead from Victoria and started their own U3As. Quite early in the piece the fledgling U3A Victoria Network developed a U3A starters kit and this was freely provided to anyone in Australia (and later NZ) who asked for it.

In 1986 the first U3As to form in other States/Territories were: U3A ACT; U3A Adelaide; U3A University of Western Australia; and U3A Sunshine Coast followed by U3A Brisbane. In 1987 the first NSW group was U3A Shoalhaven followed by the Forbes College for Seniors. In 1989 the Northern Territory's first group, Darwin U3A started; and in 1990, U3A Hobart was Tasmania's first group. The movement spread very rapidly through all States and Territories. Most of this growth occurred without any systematic funding from governments, although almost all U3As relied on in-kind support such as free or heavily subsidised teaching facilities, newsletter printing and distribution, and administration support such as second hand office equipment.

By 2007 there were 201 autonomous U3As in Australia providing a wide range of mentally stimulating courses and socially motivating activities for some 63,000 members.

The first U3A in NZ started in the Auckland region in 1989 with the launch of Remuera U3A, closely followed by U3A Epsom. By 2007, a total of 53 NZ groups, mainly in the North Island, had a collective membership of nearly 9000.

### **Why Bother?**

But why would retirees bother joining an organisation like U3A which requires self discipline and personal commitment? What about our entitlement to that well earned place in the sun? Members have their own reasons for joining. However, ongoing research continues to churn out substantial reasons why all older people should engage in the kinds of activity that U3As do so well.

The Successful Ageing model (Rowe and Kahn 1999) is just one of several models based on large-scale research which demonstrate that older people need to be proactive in only a relatively small number of areas in order to maximise their chances for prolonged independence. Other models include Healthy Ageing, Active Ageing, Productive Ageing, and Ageing Well, and each differs from the others mainly in the emphasis that they place on what are really the same small number of requisites for prolonged independence.

Successful Ageing was the product of the largest study of ageing ever carried out in the USA. The study was a compilation of dozens of studies led by 16 of the top scientists drawn from biology, neuroscience, neuropsychology, epidemiology, sociology, genetics, psychology, neurology, physiology and geriatric medicine.

The key items in the Successful Ageing model (in no priority order) are:

- Maintain high cognitive function
- Maintain high physical function
- Maintain close personal relationships
- Undertake productive activities
- Retain basic functional independence

### **Maintaining high cognitive function**

Each of the elements of the Successful Ageing model is interrelated to some extent. However from a U3Aers point of view maintaining high cognitive function would probably be *the* priority. After all, if the brain is no longer functioning effectively, could or would an individual continue to carry out the other elements of the model?

U3As' major focus is to provide a range of exciting new learning opportunities. These activities are important because they offer members a way of regularly keeping the grey matter churning. The old dog can indeed be taught new tricks. Engaging in novel learning experiences results in new synapses (links) forming between brain cells, even in people aged 90 and older. These synaptic links provide the bridges for chemical messages to stimulate brain cells and the combination of many links is believed to be the basis for memory and learning.

Importantly, lazy dogs can be revitalised even quite late in life:

“...elderly men and women who have experienced some cognitive decline can, with appropriate training, improve enough to offset approximately two decades of memory loss” (Rowe & Kahn p. 137).

Indeed, so compelling is new research demonstrating the importance of cognitive stimulation that a 2007 Alzheimer's Disease newsletter generalized by reporting that

"...eventually, it may be prudent, practical, and commonplace to recommend cognitively-stimulating activities as a way of preventing dementia. "Alzheimer's Disease newsletter 2007.

This must be greatly encouraging news for every active U3A member.

### **Maintaining high physical function**

Interestingly, Rowe and Kahn's research, and other substantial research since then, suggests that if we focus on only one element of the Successful Ageing model it should be maintaining a regular exercise routine. A regular combination of stretching, strengthening, balance and cardio-vascular exercises appears to have wide-ranging

physiological benefits including, somewhat surprisingly, promoting cognitive function. If this is indeed the case then U3A exercise-based activities such as walking for pleasure, aquaerobics, dance, yoga, tai chi, and a number of other activities routinely featured among the variety of U3A offerings are providing much wider benefits than we all realise.

### **Maintaining close personal relationships**

The importance of social networks is one of the most enduring of findings from social science research. Study after study shows that a small cadre of special friends is essential to well-being throughout life. The special friends are those we turn to for advice and support to get us through those low periods when the going gets tough. Indeed, social networks are so strongly linked to health and general well-being that a paper published as long ago as 1989 in the prestigious journal *Science* equated the health risks caused by fragmentation of social networks with those associated with the early years of smoking (House et al 1989).

It's an unfortunate fact of life that the closer we come to the wrong end of the life continuum the greater the chance of losing important social networks. The most devastating of the risk factors is of course death of a very close friend or spouse. However there are many other risks to social networks including divorce, retiring to a new location, giving up driving, prolonged bouts of ill health or incapacity and caring for a sick friend or spouse. The impact of these and similar unexpected calamitous events on older persons' social networks is readily apparent from demographic data that are routinely available in many developed countries. For example the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) (1999) reports that the average adult spends about three hours alone each day. In contrast, a man aged over 65 living alone is likely to spend 12 hours a day on his own, which represents 83% of his waking life. A woman of similar age, living alone, will spend about 78% of her waking life alone.

Without special friends we run the risk of entering a downward spiral of depression, leading to further ill health, leading to greater depression and perhaps the danger of loss of independence or, in the extreme, suicide.

But what's all this got to do with U3A? By its nature U3A is an organisation which attracts people with the verve to get-up-and-go, and to keep on getting up and going. U3A is an organisation where it is so easy to mix with people who share a common interest. Education is an intrinsically social activity and through sharing common interests, such as a particular course, like-minded people meet and new social networks form. In later life the special friends are the ones who tend to keep us on the go with suggestions of visits to the theatre, holidays, dining out and so on and help to provide a reason to get out of bed every day.

### **Undertaking productive activities**

Little needs be said about this aspect of successful ageing and U3A. A quick flick through any U3A newsletter shows a wide range of intellectually challenging and socially invigorating activities to keep members productively engaged.

### **Retaining basic functional independence**

The fifth element of the successful ageing model is the only element that U3A cannot claim as part of its stable of benefits for members. Retaining basic fundamental independence is largely up to us as individuals. Firstly we need to take steps to minimise the risk of future disease. Cut out smoking, eat less fat and red meat, eat lots of fruit, vegetables and fish, minimal alcohol intake, lose weight etc – we all know the

story. But what if we already have problems? Then modern medicine has many of the answers. In order to minimise the impact of life threatening illnesses on day to day activities it's important to stick to medical advice.

The above suggests that U3A as an organisation can genuinely promote itself as *the* successful ageing organisation whose range of activities may be saving the government buckets of money by helping to keep U3A members out of premature and expensive care. Few other clubs and organisations offer anything like the wide range of attributes which contribute to successful ageing.

### **Can U3A remain *the* successful ageing organisation?**

Society is changing very rapidly, perhaps faster than it has changed in any other period. The infusion of information technology into almost every aspect of daily lives is one of the most obvious manifestations and drivers of change. Think back to the early '90s. For most retired people the Internet was a non issue. Email was a tool used only by some academics, researchers and others who were close to the cutting edge of new technologies. By 1997, however, a few U3A enthusiasts from Australia, NZ and the UK were using email to exchange visions for the future. These exchanges led to the formation of the first U3A communications network called U3A Talk. At that time the number of U3As in Australia and NZ with email addresses was probably less than 10, although many U3As were using computers for administrative processes. Prior to the Internet, the only way for U3As to contact each other outside their own State was by reference to the printed copy of the annual Directory of U3As in Australia and NZ. The Directory was out of date before it was even completed and mailed because key office bearers were elected at different times of the year.

And look at us now. The most popular courses in most U3As are related to new technology. These range from computer kindergarten to quite sophisticated courses on digital imaging. Yes, we are certainly changing rapidly.

But are we changing rapidly enough to remain *the* successful ageing organisation?

The baby boomers are roaring into retirement with their new communications tools such as wikis, blogs, YouTube, Facebook, podcasts, and who knows what's about to appear. This is the group who will provide the new vision, ideas and energy to keep U3A moving forward and relevant to the needs of a very wide age range of retirees, provided they see us as progressive and open to change, and worth joining. If we simply seem to them to be a yesteryear club then they'll race off and start their own organisations. If that happens U3A could well suffer the same fate as those organisations which were so attractive to our parents but which are no longer around. Think of senior citizens clubs that were not able to change their image. They were not the kind of organisation that current U3A members wanted to join. Part of the surge in growth of U3As discussed earlier in this paper surely occurred because many young retirees of the 1980s and 1990s were just hanging out for a progressive new organisation that presented an image of dynamism and can do. U3A, it seemed, was destined to happen for our generations.

It is imperative we attract new younger retirees not only by being receptive to change but actually seeking change. Of course we mustn't throw out what we have always done so well - we continue to cater for our traditional constituents in the way they want their courses and activities to be provided. But we also widen our thinking so those aged 50 something are encouraged to add to the mix. Inevitably that will mean embracing the Internet far more widely than we do now.

An almost certain recipe for failure is to return to the inward looking, almost siege mentality view of U3A that many Australian and NZ U3A leaders perpetuated in the

past. At conference after conference various keynote speakers pointed to the strengths of U3A networks elsewhere. They cited examples like the Third Age Trust, which is the umbrella group for more than 500 U3As in the UK, and closer to home the Victoria U3A Network. U3A networks were touted as models of how the “multiplier effect” of working cooperatively can provide many new learning opportunities for the wider membership. However speakers from the audience strongly opposed any idea of networking. Arguments against networking and improved communications included; concerns about creeping bureaucratisation changing the freedom of individual groups to retain their autonomy; the fear of membership levies being introduced to support a national network or maintain a national database; and dangers of one group becoming overly powerful. Traditional inter-State and inter-city rivalries appeared also to shape some of the opposition to networking.

### **Landmark scythes**

Over the years a number of “scythes” have effectively mown down all but the most hardened opposition to cooperation. I may be overstating the importance of some of these scythes or missing one or two. If so please let me know so I can update this paper. It’s very easy to inadvertently rewrite history when so little has been shared about the movement in Australia and NZ over the past 23 years. Here is what I see as the major activities which have led to the 2007 position where a national U3A communications network now seems to be both desirable and practicable.

#### **1985: Genesis of the Victoria U3A Network**

I earlier wrote of the most successful network in U3A Australasia. The Victoria U3A Network is an umbrella organisation for 81 U3As with a collective membership of more than 21,000 members. One small U3A is yet to join the network. The strength of the U3A movement in Victoria is due to the coordinated efforts of the network spreading the U3A message and providing strong support for new groups to form throughout the State. Their free “U3A Starter Kit” has helped many new U3As throughout Australasia to start out on the right foot.

Probably the Network’s most important feature is its “peak” status with the state government. The Network president has direct access to relevant ministers to inform them of the importance of the U3A movement to Victoria. As a consequence, for years the Network has received substantial government funding (more than \$130,000 in 2007) to maintain the office and secretariat and to distribute to member U3As to help them better provide member services.

The Network publishes a quarterly newsletter for members, which includes information about various cooperative activities such as travel, exchanges with other U3As, talks by researchers and other visitors of interest, and so on. For more than 20 years this communications network has worked very effectively within Victoria, to the advantage of many older learners.

#### **1989: Genesis of the NSW U3A Network**

NSW is the State where the most vocal opposition to networking has occurred. Until quite recently the management of U3A Sydney, which is a huge U3A with more than 5000 members, and some smaller NSW U3As, were strongly opposed to any form of State networking. In 1989, in the face of strong opposition, the NSW U3A Network (then called the NSW Council of U3A) met formally for the first time. The Network has progressively grown since then and in 2007 fifty-three of 54 U3As in NSW belonged. Sydney U3A joined for the first time in 2007. The catalyst for growth and change has

probably been the annual NSW U3A State conference, a Network event open to all U3As from Australia and NZ.

Apart from its collegial approach to conferencing the Network has also initiated other wide-ranging benefits for the wider U3A movement particularly in the last five years. For example, they have arranged an insurance scheme available for all Australian U3As; and are currently compiling a library of U3A courses which is freely available to member U3As.

### **1991: The annual Directory of U3As in Australia and NZ**

In 1991, for the first time, compilation and distribution of an annual Directory of U3As in Australia and NZ provided all U3As with ready access to basic information about other groups. Information included U3A addresses, phone and fax numbers, names of major office bearers and a sentence or two about features or unusual courses within a particular U3A group. Email and website addresses were also added as the Internet became more popular with U3A administrators. Access to these basic contact details prompted many U3As to exchange newsletters; some also arranged joint ventures with other groups. Other information in the directory included the year of foundation and current membership. These latter details have been the only way of tracking U3A growth over the years.

The print version was published each year until 1999, after which the electronic version maintained by U3A Online took over. The online directory is probably the most important U3A communication resource throughout Australasia. It can be updated immediately and information about new U3As added almost as quickly as details are provided.

### **1997: U3ATalk**

By 1997 twenty or so U3A enthusiasts in Australia, NZ and the UK had begun to exchange email about U3A cooperation and this gave rise to the email list called U3ATalk, a free electronic communications network hosted on Griffith University servers. Because very few U3As in Australasia had an email address in 1997, I wrote to all presidents listed in the Directory to ask them to find local members who used email and who would act as conduits between the U3ATalk discussions and their respective management committees. At its peak nearly 400 members in Australia, NZ and the UK were sharing information via this informal information network about diverse topics including insurance, copyright, health and safety, exchange visits, sharing of courseware, attracting new course leaders, and visiting speakers. In 1998 a similar discussion list called U3ANewZ, also freely hosted by Griffith University, was introduced in an effort to increase networking opportunities within NZ. However lack of response caused that network to close within two or three years. In 2006, U3ATalk moved to the WorldU3A server where lively exchanges with a wider audience continue.

### **1998: U3A Online**

The world first virtual U3A was funded in 1998 by the Australian Government as part of its commitment to the International Year of Older Persons. U3A Online started with two principal objectives of providing free resources to Australian U3As; and intellectually stimulating online courses for isolated older people who could not easily attend their local U3A. From the outset the three founders shared the belief that because the Internet has no geographic boundaries, the courses should be available to isolated older people from any country. Similarly the free resources would be available for any U3A anywhere but would be targeted particularly at Australian and NZ U3As. The free resources currently include the electronic version of the Directory, Signposts; research

reports and scholarly documents related to third age learning; U3A OzNewZ; ideas for classes; and more. More are added each time an appropriate resource is found.

U3As in Australia and NZ are invited to join U3A Online as members. Apart from a desire to improve communications between U3As, benefits include voting at the virtual AGM, and site-licences permitting U3A groups to print off unlimited copies of the 30 plus courses for face-to-face teaching. By 2007 the number of organisational U3As from Australia and NZ had reached 73.

A number of scholarly articles have been published which point to the effectiveness of U3A Online in improving the quality of life of isolated older people and helping to establish better communications between U3As, particularly in Australasia. (These articles are freely available from [www.u3aonline.org.au](http://www.u3aonline.org.au); then click *U3A Online* in the left menu; then select *Research/Reports*.)

### **1998: U3A Conference Sydney**

The Sydney U3A conference in 1998 became a landmark scythe when the president of the NSW Network, who was chairing a session, raised the idea of a national clearing house for U3A courses and information and received by show of hands, overwhelming support from the attendees. The vote had no official status - it was merely an expression of opinion from those who saw the value of U3As working in a more collegial way and supporting activities which were currently underway. A substantial majority of attendees were Sydney U3A members.

### **2006 and 2007: NSW Network AGM and conference**

The 2006 watershed meeting in Merimbula marked the first occasion when the presidents of the NSW U3A Network, the Victoria U3A Network and U3A Online met together at the same forum and spoke openly to delegates about their interest in improving national communications between U3As. The 2007 conference in Lismore strengthened the cooperation momentum when the views of the three network presidents were reinforced by support from the presidents of U3A Sydney (5200 members) and U3A ACT (3300 members), the two biggest U3As in Australasia.

### **2007 ACT conference**

The growing momentum discussed above took a leap forward at the ACT conference when representatives from more than 30 U3As, including NZ, gathered on stage and spoke to the audience of their desire for greater cooperation between U3As. The three network presidents and many representatives and administrators from individual U3As were all of accord that cooperation and networking across borders and countries must increase. (Although this paper was written for the 2007 ACT conference it was been subsequently updated and will continue to be updated as other U3As provide data which supersedes my information. The latest version will remain available through the U3A Online website.)

### **Other landmark scythes**

Over the years U3As in Australasia have organised many regional, national and international U3A conferences. Each of these has contributed to the momentum for cooperation, either overtly through the choice of speakers who raised questions relating to future U3A vision, or less obviously through the increasing presence of U3A leaders who were interested in attending conferences to share ideas and friendships. National/international conferences not already discussed have been run by Victoria (several), ACT, Adelaide, Auckland, Bundaberg, Christchurch, Darwin, Sunraysia, Sunshine Coast and Tauranga.



## **What might a communications network look like?**

Now that the momentum is firmly in place for much greater communication and networking to occur between U3As in Australasia thoughts inevitably turn to what such a network might look like?

With the large distances involved and allied expenses like travel and accommodation, face-to-face meetings are almost certainly out of the question. However, the U3A Online experience suggests a possibility. Committee members of U3A Online have worked together via the Internet for many years and some have never met, and may never meet, other members of their team. They formally “meet” three times a year and also run their AGM exclusively through the Blackboard course delivery software provided by supporter Griffith University. Blackboard, and similar packages used in universities worldwide, allows virtual students to communicate with their lecturer and with each other and obtain their degrees, all without ever physically meeting.

In 2005 a trial U3A communications network called U3A Presid-net was set up on Blackboard to test a method by which U3A presidents in Australasia ultimately might be able to communicate about common matters of interest. Some suggested discussion topics included cooperative courses, U3A travel groups, insurance, sharing courseware and course leaders, planning conferences and so forth. The trial was limited to a few decision makers in the NSW Network, Victoria Network, U3A Sydney and U3A Online. The trial ran for several weeks and was highly rated by most participants but, in the end, was shelved because U3A Sydney personnel thought it unnecessary. U3A politics in 2005 had not quite reached the stage where the communications network idea could be tested on a wider scale.

It is likely that Griffith University would freely host an Australian/NZ U3A leaders’ communication network. However, there are many other networking sites available through the Internet. One of the strengths of a virtual communications network is that no one needs “own” the place of meeting. If a convenor is needed then one could be informally appointed by agreement for (say) a year. For example, the convenor may be from a hypothetical U3A such as Stewart Island U3A; or from the Aboriginal U3A which U3A Online has been discussing with tribal elders.

There’s yet another reason why a physical location within a particular place in Australia may be impracticable. Funding of adult education is a State responsibility. It’s up to State U3As to lobby their government for support, just as the Victoria Network does so successfully. No State government would countenance providing funds for U3As in other States. Locating a physical presence in Canberra with a view to lobbying the Australian Government for support is likely to meet with political opposition such as directing that all requests should come through Adult Learning Australia, which is the peak body for adult education nationally.

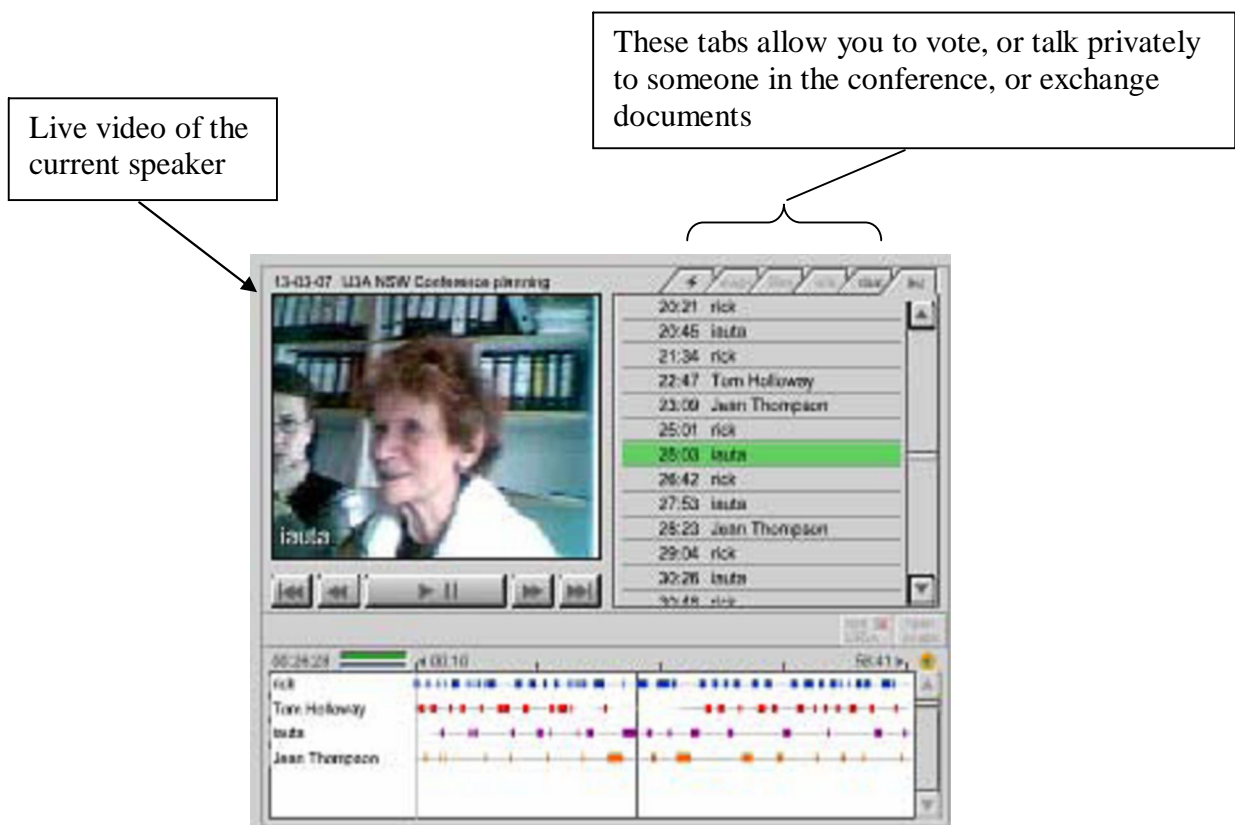
The beauty of Internet meeting is that geography and physical location are no obstacles. Meeting online takes care of concerns such as cost, location, bureaucratisation and power cliques.

In the following section I’ll briefly discuss other U3A Internet resources, most of which could be immediately adopted at the local U3A level.

## Other U3A Internet resources

### FlashMeeting

What if people in our mooted communications network want to “meet” face-to-face? Again that can be done free via the Internet with something like FlashMeeting. FlashMeeting allows video meetings to take place with people from other countries, each sitting in the comfort of their own home. All that’s needed is a broadband Internet connection and an inexpensive webcam and microphone. A registered user pre-books and sends the meeting password to up to 25 participants. At the designated time, participants log into their FlashMeeting. The screen below shows a shot of a FlashMeeting held earlier in 2007 between Tom Holloway (India); Jean Thompson (UK); Carmen Stadelhofer (Germany) and Rick Swindell (Oz). The topic was cooperative learning opportunities. Pictured is Carmen Stadelhofer from Ulm who is the current AIUTA vice president.



### WorldU3A <http://worldu3a.org/>

WorldU3A is an excellent example of the stimulating cooperative teaching/learning resources which can be shared via the Internet. WorldU3A is the brainchild of UK colleagues Tom Holloway and Jean Thompson, each of whom has visited Australasia for conferences and to work with regional U3As. WorldU3A offers a range of stimulating projects to engage the enquiring mind of any U3A member regardless of where they live.

One of the most important of the projects is Timewitnesses which resides on its own domain at [www.timewitnesses.org](http://www.timewitnesses.org). This living archive allows people from any country with memories of WWII to share their stories for everyone to see. Many Australasian U3A members have memories which they too could share. Timewitnesses is not only a powerful antiwar statement it is a superb educational resource freely available to

schools and scholars around the world. Many of the stories have been translated into German and French and in a number of cases school children assisted with the translations. Kids are addicted to the web. What a marvellous way for teachers to amalgamate history, language, geography and sociology-based subjects into a captivating intergenerational learning experience.

Another of the valuable projects on WorldU3A is the ongoing “technical support” email list involving a network of hundreds of U3A members with computer and Internet skills who can provide almost immediate answers to technology-based problems, which we all encounter from time to time.

I’ve earlier mentioned U3ATalk, which now resides on WorldU3A as an international exchange medium. Many Australian and NZ U3A members receive the free Australasian version of the monthly email newsletter called Signposts, which is jointly edited by Tom Holloway and me.

### **What’s a wiki?**

A wiki is an incredibly easy to set up website which allows many people to add their own pages of information or modify work done by others. It is a simple matter to add photographs, videos and other media to make the site exciting and interactive. Many of us have come across the wiki idea before by typing into Google or other search engines a request for a definition. For example, by typing into a Google search the term “what is a u3a?” one of the first listed items will take you to wikipedia, the free encyclopaedia with more than two million entries which anyone can add to or change. (In case you are wondering, there are checks and balances to confirm the reliability of the information, before any entry is accepted or changed.)

The same idea can be easily set up to allow Australian and NZ U3As to exchange ideas. On a small scale I have an example of this with Redlands U3A near Brisbane, which for several years has had a writers group who research famous Australians (yep – there are some ☺ ). They develop their stories and as each new story is written the writers set up new pages and publish their stories on the joint wiki. Any member of the group can then add to or change any story or upload photographs to build on the ideas already there. A number of people from other U3As are already adding to the wiki. You can see the example at <http://redlandsu3a.pbwiki.com/> You’ll need to type the password **u3a** to get in but please don’t add to the stories without advising the president as a matter of courtesy. What a simple and motivating way for older learners to share their work and gain from other writers’ ideas!

The best way to understand how simple it is to set up a wiki is for you to experiment with your own, for example by setting up a site where your extended family can each start their own page and share photographs and family news with each other. Show them what a nerd you’ve become. Here’s how:

1. Go to <http://pbwiki.com/>
2. Dream up a name for your wiki
3. Within seconds your wiki address will be sent to you by email
4. Click to open
5. Pick an easy password for your family to remember (the password keeps sightseers away ☺ )
6. Select the free option. It gives you 10 MB of free space, enough for a very large number of photographs and other information

7. Follow the instructions. Use the excellent help functions or if necessary send them an email – they will reply within 24 hours with helpful advice.

If you'd like greater detail please download the illustrated 14 page guide written for U3As entitled *How to set up a wiki*. Once we understand the simplicity of wikis we can easily set up similar sites for our own UTAs to help members to share information and ideas. It is very rewarding for older learners to see their creative writing, poetry, photography, art, whatever, come alive on the Internet for others to see.

### **Concluding comment**

The baby boomer tsunami is upon us. Countless new retirees who routinely use new communications-based technologies, are roaring into retirement every day seeking interesting things to do with their new-found leisure time. Many have excellent skills which they would be happy to share with others via the Internet and many will have new ideas of how the Internet could help us and them to engage in new cooperative learning ventures.

The average age of U3A members is probably 10 or more years older than the average age of new retirees. We need to demonstrate to them and to ourselves that we remain a forward thinking group who welcome new ideas and new ways of doing things. There should be no need for new retirees to start new organisations because of a perception that U3A can't move with the time. International U3A cooperation via the Internet has been taking place for some time and is an excellent way of demonstrating our openness to change. International cooperation opens up a new world of learning and teaching possibilities for younger and older retirees alike.

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