Aussie edTech innovators

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It’s eight-thirty on a Sunday evening, and while most of the country settles down to watch the movie of the week, a group of dedicated educators from Australia, and around the world, is eagerly awaiting for the first question of the weekly chat on #AussieED. The topic of tonight's chat, which marks the start of the school year for many, is ‘Getting Stuff Done’ and as they wait for the moderator to launch the first question, attendees are busy introducing themselves with a note about whether they are morning or night people:

Hi stephi from perth, unfortunately I'm a nocturnal creature
Jason from sydney. Love mornings
Bryn from Manchester, UK. I am not a morning person.
I'm Mark, in Whangarei in NZ, and I am very much a night person

(#AussieED, 2015)

While social media is often portrayed as a forum for an increasingly narcissistic population to gain approval for everything from what they had for breakfast to how cute their pet is, a growing number of innovative teachers is taking advantage of evolving technology to collaborate with like-minded educators in a bid to share ideas and take control of their professional development. Two pioneers who are building a bridge from their classrooms to the global stage are Brett Salakas, founder of #AussieED and Eleni Kyritsis, co-developer of monthly web-show challenge TeachTechPlay.

Salakas, who is a classroom teacher and the Religious Education Coordinator at St Kevin’s in Eastwood, describes #AussieED as his “pet passion project”. About two years ago, he discovered edchats and started participating in and learning from some of these, but as most were hosted overseas he found they didn't precisely meet his needs. With characteristic enthusiasm, he set about cherry picking the best ideas from each, and supported by other teachers in his network who have remained involved in various capacities such as moderators, set up #AussieED.

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The very first chat had a practical focus and involved six schools that Salakas had organised to collaborate with to discuss the rollout of the Australian Curriculum. The format proved successful and after several participants suggested that the chats be more regular, Salakas looked to find a time that would maximise participation. He picked Sunday as being the quietest night, with a timeslot late enough to allow parents to have put their children to bed, without being so late that hardly anyone would participate. “The first chat had like about 70 Tweets and the second chat had 270 Tweets… but it only took about three months before we were having hundreds and hundreds of teachers come,” Salakas recounts.

As the word about #AussieED spread, it started to garner support from influential people in the Twittersphere such as American academic Dr Mark Weston. “He gave us a few shout-outs,” Salakas explains, “and then all of a sudden what was probably 500 to 1000 Australian teachers, suddenly a couple of thousand American teachers joined us which made us trend, and then once we began to trend, now we have educators from all over the world.” The most recent chat, which was in what Salakas considers a quiet time, attracted 2100 participants, a Tweet reach of 4.7 million (for the uninitiated, TweetReach is the total number of estimated unique Twitter users that tweets about a particular search term are delivered to (Union Metrics Help Desk, 2015)), and almost 10,000 re-Tweets, impressive results when you consider the initiative is only a little over two years old.

The format of the chats is deceptively simple. Each session has a designated topic about which a host from the #aussieED team or a guest moderator asks around six questions, spaced throughout the hour that the chat runs. Salakas says that there are typically around 1000 responses to each question, and this sparks intense interaction between participants. On the ‘Getting Stuff Done’ night, hosted by AussieED
team member Rob McTaggart, questions include, “How do we support our students to be more productive and to have positive habits & routines?” and “Marking and report time especially can be so challenging for many teachers. How do you make it work?”

The responses cover the spectrum from venting to skiting, but are mainly focused on both giving useful advice and building a sense of collegiality with those who are in a similar situation. For example, answers to the reports question include:

**Cherie:** Leaders can create ways to release tchers; provide good scaffolding in weeks leading in; take out unnecessary mgs; 

**Danielle:** in exchange for numerical reports we run a flipped parents evening. Students present any piece of work to parents & tutor; 

**Kieron:** we have short reports, close school for a day and run parent/child consultations all day (#AussieED, 2015) 

Past topics on #AussieED are empathy, feedback and assessment, digital citizenship, and the more intriguing teach like a pirate and be more dog sessions. For interested educators who are not able to make the Sunday night timeslot, a ‘Storified’ version of the chat is available through the #AussieED archive. It is admittedly much harder to follow the threads of conversation this way, so I would recommend that you attend in real time if you are can find time.

Salakas attributes much of the success of #AussieED to the fact that it meets the needs of teachers in a way that is much more effective than many system-run professional development (PD) activities. “Because it’s such a grass roots initiative… it’s coming from teachers themselves, it’s teacher guided and it just means 10 times more because of that.”

His assertions are backed up in a recent report into effective teacher PD by consulting company edSurge that indicates, “Teachers say again and again that they get the most value out of informal learning opportunities such as EdCamps and Twitter chats. That suggests these activities need to be leveraged and included in their professional development. Such informal learning needs to be demonstrable, measurable, and go beyond reflections… Teachers who put a lot of time and work into these opportunities should get some sort of acknowledgement for this work” (edSurge, 2014). Our own Australian Professional Standards for Teaching also highlight the importance of teacher-driven PD; Standard 6 ‘Engage in professional learning’ at the Lead Teacher level encompasses elements such as, “Initiate collaborative relationships to expand professional learning opportunities…” and “Advocate, participate in and lead strategies to support high-quality professional learning opportunities for colleagues that focus on improved student learning” (AITSL, 2014).

Salakas also offers another explanation for the growing popularity of #AussieED – it’s not who you are but what you have to offer that’s most important when you are posting online. “You’re not valued for your credentials, you’re not valued for all the things that you may have done, or the fancy job that you may hold or the position you hold at the moment; you’re judged on the idea that you present. And if people don’t like that idea, if people find what you say is wrong… they’ll either ignore it or they’ll call you on it. And it’s a great leveler because the Tweet or the message or the idea or the concept that comes from the most experienced PhD educational researcher and the brand new first year out teacher, they’re worth the same – 140 characters of the same.” In a world where seniority is often equated with time served (although thankfully this is becoming less the case), Twitter chats offer a forum where every voice can be heard. The sense of choice is also an empowering factor. Salakas observes that if he were to run a boring #AussieED chat, people just wouldn’t turn up. Unlike at traditional face-to-face PD sessions, if participants do attend and aren’t finding it valuable, they can simply log off. The concept is, however, obviously appealing to a wide range of educators. As you might expect, pre-service teachers who are more likely to be au fait with the technology are well represented, but there seems to be a good spread of ages and experience that allows for robust and rich exchanges.

One of Salaka’s favourite stories is of a school leader from the independent sector who was feeling disillusioned with education. “She was ready to quit the profession,” he says. “She was feeling lost; she was feeling disengaged with her staff. She was finding it very hard to draw motivation and engage everyone, and the ideas that she’s been able to gain from AussieED and that sense of online collegiality has sort of reinvigorated her whole career.” In a paper discussing social media and teachers’ professional learning, McLoughlin (2011) found that, “…teacher learning is multifaceted and dynamic, and that development of teacher skills and knowledge is highly interactive, individualised, socially mediated and metacognitive.” Solutions such as #AussieED are offering teachers a new way to manage their own PD that incorporates many of these traits.

Eleni Kyritsis has also experienced the power of social media and new technologies when it comes to teacher professional development. Together with co-founder Michael Ha, she established TeachTechPlay, a monthly web show where educators from around the world are invited or self-nominate to showcase educational tools and lessons that have engaged and motivated students to learn. Run on the first Monday of the month at 8 pm, the shows give each presenter just four minutes to demonstrate and explain their concept, followed by a short question time delivered by the other presenters. Viewers then vote on the episode’s ‘Play King or Queen,’ the most popular contribution of the night.

Kyritsis, a classroom teacher at an independent girls’ school in Melbourne, explains that they decided to develop TeachTechPlay as a recorded online show in Google Hangouts to broaden the audience. “If you just have a chat on Twitter, it’s really set to a time limit; when you air it live, people can watch it in their own time.”

All previous webisodes are available for viewing on the TeachTechPlay website, and cover an amazing array of topics including Minecraft, Genius Hour, QR Codes and augmented reality. There was even a bonus episode dedicated to physical education, which featured five PE teachers sharing how they use technology in their lessons. It has been the second highest rated show in the series so far.

Initially TeachTechPlay was looking to focus on local Melbourne teachers, but the interest from educators throughout Australia and around the world has been overwhelming. “We’ve even had educators from America waking up at 3 am to be part of it which is amazing,” Kyritsis says. While Kyritsis and Ha use their own contacts developed through their participation in Google Educator Groups (EGG) and other tech networks to find suitable presenters, interested educators can use the Contact Us section on the TeachTechPlay website to submit a proposal for a presentation. Kyritsis emphasises the fact that the quality of the presenters is critical, and efforts are made to ensure that a wide spread of topics is covered.

Over time, Kyritsis has also developed effective processes to make sure that presenters are suitably prepared and supported for their four-minute demonstration. “Once you agree to present and we select a date… I send an information pack to

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**Join the community**

#AussieED @AussieEDchat
https://twitter.com/AussieEDchat
http://aussieed.com

Chats take place every Sunday night, currently at 8:30 pm EST. Check the website for topics.

TeachTechPlay
http://www.teachtechplay.com/home
Episodes take place on the first Monday of the month at 8 pm EST. Check the website for topics and presenters.

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all presenters. So in this pack, it provides a Google doc with the running of the show – so order of presenters, how it all works, who will be introducing who – and they just put in a brief title that they're going to be presenting on.” Contributors send in a photo and a bio prior to the show so that the website can be updated with details of what is on offer in upcoming episodes. Kyritsis also offers to run new presenters through the technical aspects of a Google Hangout if they are not familiar with how one works.

Neither Salakas nor Kyritsis have encountered any major challenges on the road to success, although as you would expect, technology doesn't always behave the way it’s supposed to. Kyritsis recalls that for one of their early episodes, “Two minutes before we went live on air we had no presenters; they couldn’t get into the Hangout, so that was awesome fun!” TeachTechPlay presenters now log on half an hour before the start time to allow for technical difficulties, to let everyone introduce themselves, and to talk through how the show works.

The current audience for live TeachTechPlay episodes is around 30 people, but teachers from Europe who might be in class at the time or from the US who might be sleeping can always watch it later. “That’s the great thing with TeachTechPlay; it doesn’t really matter who watches it live.” The biggest total audience to-date has been around 950 viewers, which considering that word of mouth has been the primary promotion tool, speaks volumes about the hunger that teachers have for information and ideas in ICT.

Although the audience is primarily classroom teachers and ICT Leaders, Kyritsis says that school students also tune in to the broadcasts. “We’ve even had kids who are excited and engaged about ICT who are watching it.” At the end of each episode, a Google Form is sent out to allow viewers to vote for the Play King or Queen. Voting remains open for five days, after which the winner is identified on the website. The voting is a way to keep viewers interested and actively engaged with what is happening in the show.

Kyritsis identifies the opportunities for networking and making connections as the highlight for her so far. She also enjoys the sense that she is making an impact. “This is my fourth year of teaching and if you’d asked me four years ago what I would be doing, I’d say just in the classroom doing my normal job.” Kyritsis echoes the sentiments of Salakas in terms of online interaction being a great leveller: “A lot of people think you have to be teaching for years to have something to share, but it’s not about what you know, it’s about how you approach education today.”

Networking has been a striking benefit for participants in AussieED chats too. Salakas recalls how during a chat about the role of sport in education today, “I have to look at my local bike clubs and my local bike shop.” Salakas says, “Cadel Evans somehow has picked up on that. He’s jumped on AussieED and Cadel’s gone, ‘Oh, look, I’m based in Adelaide. I’ll happily help you out. I’ll connect you to the right people.’” With increasing evidence that, “Children and young people have performed better where schools have utilised the variety of networks, organisations and activities available in the community (Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, n.d.), these kinds of organic connections are likely to be ones that make a huge impression on the lives of students.

So if you feel like you are stuck in a teaching rut, need ideas to motivate staff or want to share your experiences with like-minded educators, it turns out there is no need to get up off the couch. Turn off the Sunday night re-runs and tune into one of the new, free opportunities innovators like Eleni Kyritsis and Brett Salakas are developing. As Kyritsis observes, “Keeping those connections and seeing what others are doing, I think that’s the main thing. Educators around the world are doing awesome things and the more you can tap into it, the more you actually learn. And every episode, I always continue to learn something, which is really cool.”

Further reading