ASCILITE 2026

The Future is Connection:

Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society

We are living in a digital world: Evolving connection beyond the 'material'

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This Pecha Kucha presentation offers a reflective, practice-based account of what it means to work, connect, and grow in a digital academic world where presence is no longer defined by place. Drawing on my experience as a mentee in the SEED (Support, Engage, Energise, Develop) mentoring program at my Australian university, alongside ongoing participation in and facilitation of Communities of Practice (CoPs), it explores how connection evolves beyond the "material" conditions of campus, location, and physical proximity in distributed academic contexts.

Although I am based at a single campus, the university operates across multiple locations with staff distributed nationally. Combined with infrequent on-campus attendance, much of my engagement occurs online. This became particularly visible during a recent transition into a new role. Previously, I worked closely with a small team where connection was immediate and embedded in daily interactions. Moving into a new role shifted this dynamic; conversations became more structured, and familiar connections less immediate. This transition highlighted how connection, once supported by proximity, requires deliberate cultivation in digital environments.

Mentoring through the SEED program has been a consistent element of my professional development, providing continuity across changing roles and contexts. As a mentee, I engage in a structured, psychologically safe space for reflection, sense-making, and career navigation. Reflective practice supports my ability to interpret change, challenge assumptions, and respond with greater awareness and resilience (Schön, 1983). Beyond professional development, mentoring also contributes to wellbeing by offering stability and relational continuity during periods of transition.

Alongside mentoring, my ongoing engagement in CoPs, including Coffee and Scholarship, Let's Talk, SHIFT, and Health and Education (H&E) Innovation sessions, creates opportunities for connection that extend beyond immediate teams. These digitally mediated spaces bring together colleagues across campuses, disciplines and roles, fostering dialogue, shared inquiry, and collaborative problem-solving across contexts. Over time, my role has shifted from participation to facilitation, reshaping how I approach leadership. Rather than directing, I focus on enabling connection, supporting participation, and fostering inclusive environments. Structured approaches to engagement help sustain these connections over time (Salmon, 2013).

Through these experiences, connection is not diminished in digital environments but evolves in form. While proximity-based relationships may become less immediate, new connections emerge that are broader and sustained through shared practice. This reflects relational approaches to learning, where dialogue, trust, and shared meaning underpin both individual development and collective growth, and where relational work shapes identity and wellbeing (Nudelman, 2026).

Challenges remain, including reduced informal interaction, fragmented communication, and moments of isolation. Addressing these requires intentional strategies such as active participation, facilitation, and creating small moments of connection through follow-ups and informal check-ins, supporting belonging across distributed contexts.

These experiences align with social learning theory, where learning develops through participation in communities (Wenger, 1998; Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020). Together, mentoring and CoPs support evolving forms of connection that contribute to professional identity, career progression, resilience, and growth.

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This presentation offers a human-centred perspective on connection in digital higher education, highlighting how connection can be intentionally sustained, adapted, and redefined in digitally mediated academic work.

Keywords: Reflective practice, Communities of Practice, Digital connection, Professional identity

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Carnahan, S. (2026, Nov 29 – Dec 2). We are living in a digital world: Evolving connection beyond the 'material'. [Pecha Kucha Presentation]. In Cochrane, T., Narayan, V., Poole, T., Lai, P., Lake, P., Moore, O., & Li, L. (Eds.), *The Future is Connection: Collaboration, Creativity and Compassion in a Digital Society*. Proceedings ASCILITE 2026. Brisbane (pp. 72–73). https://doi.org/10.65106/apubs.2026.3125

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